

Freshly Cut Grass

The air sings with the fragrance of freshly cut grass. As a backdrop to other things, children are at play, swinging too and fro, running and skipping; there are toddlers who toddle and mindful mothers who watch on in painful and patient distraction. The sun is everywhere: in the corners of the pavilion, bearing down on the tennis courts, caressing the flower beds, the convection of its heat pulling at the carpet-like lawns, dragging out bodily its scent.

Meanwhile the park keeper potters about, the days' work done, reluctant to leave his eternal garden with its endless memories.

Standing in the shade of elm he drifts away, and almost never comes back. He half-watches half-feels the bumble bees bumble from flower to flower. Else where, there is great inactivity, and everyone is busy doing it to a degree close to perfection.

The park keeper, a simple man in blue overalls, T-shirt, straw hat, blue pumps and pockets full of silence, seeks out the cool of deeper shadow, retiring to the hidden security of his tool shed, where he sits in the stripy curve of a well worn deck chair. Door ajar, pipe smouldering, gazing out into the summery world through eyes bright with the light of nearly wisdom, he surveys his universe with unhurried care.

A days grass cutting concluded, the park keeper presently plays part of an extra, superfluous to the tale's needs, and knowing this, he fades from focus.

Over a ways, cross legged, mounted on a blanket and hiding on the inside of a book, sits the person of Doris, who, like her name, is of another age. On display, for the world to see, like a dusty exhibit in the quiet, unvisited corner of a dead museum, she awaits the attention of an appreciative visitor. She will wait all summer if needs be. Needs be.

These days, on those rare occasions, during those hot, sticky, sweat-filled interludes, she has a strange feeling the men she sleeps with are simply having sex with themselves. She feels like an incidental, an accidental, an irrelevance. It seems, to her, a solitary sport.

Thirty one years old, she wears shoulder length hair of a blondish tone, which is to say, muddy. Doris uses expensive "Botanical Formula" hair conditioner, imported from Sweden, which makes the blonde streaks shine and sparkle like golden rays of summer sunshine- or so it says on the bottle. Like her age she is not fooled by it, but buys the stuff, and in quantity, anyway, anyway.

It is Friday afternoon. All of it. Doris nibbles half heartedly on a cucumber sandwich, its crust removed, and sips hot black coffee from a thermos with similar lack of will. She inhales the fragrance of freshly cut grass, and feels the force of its intoxication take hold. Thus, inebriated, it pulls her back through time, through a life time of parks and cucumber sandwiches, to a place where the pain and the wanting bleeds from her mind, draining the life force in its scarlet stream. To a place where her emotional demise first shook her by the hand, and would not let go. Through the years she tumbles, and, seeing the ground coming up fast, she gives out a cry, for she has reached a time when she knew life, felt life.

Even in those days she was not the prettiest of girls. Not quite ugly, she possessed an air of plainness that others found difficult to breath. It was the nineteenth of July. Doris was twenty years old. She checked her watch distractedly. She was feeling ill, physically sick, needing to vomit. The park keeper was busy cutting the rich green grass of summer England. Filling the air with its sweetness, its foul smelling sweetness, the strands of grass fell in a parody of mutilation. She hardly saw any of this. Him. Her eyes

were focused somewhere distant, where no one else could see. Perhaps she had glimpsed her future. Doris, impatient, wandered over to the park shop where she bought a cup of Styrofoam coffee. She sipped its sweet bitter flavour. She was sad, mindlessly sad. Worried, mindlessly worried. She needed to cry, but there was no one to see her tears, so she held them back. How long would he be? She had said eleven o'clock, and it was already ten past. Maybe he wasn't coming. Maybe he didn't care. Maybe he wasn't coming. Maybe he didn't care. Maybe he wasn't coming. Maybe he didn't care. Then she saw him, walking beside the rose beds with hands lost in his pockets. Doris calmed to a state of panic.

"Hello Jeff."

(At last).

"Hi," he told her. "What's wrong?"

"Sit down," she said.

(Calm down, Doris. Take it easy. Do it properly).

He sat.

"How are you?"

(Delay the moment. Beat about the bush).

"I'm okay. What's it all about?"

"It's nice today. They're cutting the lawns."

(I wonder if he can see it in my eyes? If the fear is written on my face?).

It was, but Jeff could not read.

"I don't have too long you know. They'll miss me at work."

"Oh."

(You hate the place anyway).

"What's wrong?" He was eager to get on his way. He was not a park person, like Doris, though she pretended he was.

"I have some bad news."

(Bad news! That's a good one. Bad news: it will rain tomorrow. Bad news: my mother's ill).

"What?"

She took out a cigarette.

"Want one?"

(Take one, please. I need more time. I don't know how).

Just then the park keeper walked by, and even then he looked as old as time, and almost half as forgetful. He offered a warm smile to Doris, who grabbed it with an eagerness born of need.

(Thank you).

"Thanks," Jeff took one. She made great labour of lighting up.

"Your hand's shaking."

"Yes."

(Out with it. Just say it. Tell him).

"I'm pregnant."

(I did it. Maybe he doesn't care).

"You sure?"

"Yes."

(Of course I'm sure. He doesn't care).

"Jesus Christ."

(He doesn't care).

"Jesus fucking Christ."

They sat in silence for a moment.

(He doesn't care. Why doesn't he say something?)

"Don't you take precautions, for God's sake?"

" "

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"So what you going to do?"

(Me? Us. What are we going to do?)

"I don't know."

"You'll have to get rid of it." The need to vomit became unbearable. Doris hurried over to the ladies toilet, where it came burning up her throat. In that moment, she lived and died forever. She walked back to the bench where Jeff stood waiting.

"Listen, I've got to go. They'll miss me. Call me. Okay?" She looked down to her feet.

(Oh God oh God oh god oh god.).

"Okay?" Doris glanced up to his cold dark eyes for the briefest of moments. They were like pit shafts descending into the bowels of the earth. Black and dirty. Dirty. As she looked into them some of the filth came off, was blown by the breeze onto her pale white skin.

"Okay?" he insisted.

She said, " Okay." It was the hardest word she had ever been forced to say. With it, she knew he had been set free. The worm had wriggled free.

She never saw him again. She saw him everyday for the rest of her life.

It was all so long ago, akin to a dream. It had been real enough though, and she is strangely thankful for it. Thankful to have known existence, and felt the terrible pain of it. She can almost feel the echo of its sorrow.

Doris is all but dead, and she all but knows it. The fire of her life is fuelled by a few remaining drops of hope, but even they will soon be exhausted. She stands to leave. Walking by the park keeper in his hide-away, he gives a smile of recognition.

Of his routine, she knows it well. Next Friday he will once again mow the lawns, releasing their fragrance into the air, to fill the world with sweet perfume. Doris will be there, to breathe it deeply, gasping for more, until it fills her mind, until she becomes drunk, once again, with that smell of freshly cut grass.

