

ACORN BUTTER

Tom McGulliger was fond of coating oak leaves with transparent nail polish and then stringing them together to hang over the fireplace. He liked the way the apricot colours contrasted, because Jolene would have said they looked like Christmas lights. Tom was a man who enjoyed his coffee black with five spoons of sugar, to coat the bitterness. He believed seventy five was still an acceptable age to chop wood and he was thoroughly convinced that acorns smelled like melancholy with a hint of cinnamon.

The nuts were kept in an ash bowl in the center of the living room table. Each one was polished until its reflection was good enough to use for plucking eyebrows. The surfaces were a rich, creamy caramel, and the cupules resilient enough to withstand being thrown across the room, sometimes after a particularly drawn out conversation over a topic Tom had grown weary of hearing.

“We have to sell this place,” his daughter would say as she slid a finger across the dresser and then scrutinised her skin for dust.

“You are getting too old,” his son would add as he examined a dried slice of orange that decorated the window sill.

“A nursing home would be much better,” they concurred.

Ever since Jolene’s death, both kids were eager to move Tom closer to the city. But Tom was retired now, and he had had enough of the sound of traffic and the thick smoky air and the murmur of air conditioned rooms.

“But I *have* spoken to my doctor. He told me I needed medicine and prescribed me with a high dosage of nature!”

But the joke had worn off. The kids would leave the little cabin and promise that one day they would turn his mind around. Their Mercedes would accelerate out the drive way happy to get back to a world it felt more comfortable in.

Every morning Tom lit the wood stove and the house rose to the smell of burning pine. After, he picked up the acorns scattered across the living room, a process that had become routine. Looking down at one, Tom saw the reflection of a wrinkled face that seemed to trick people into believing he needed nurses and a grocery list of medication. It was the face that masked the necessity and revealed the stereotype, and it made him wish the acorn’s skin were coarse and dull. He put one between his teeth and smiled. Instead of asking how long until they broke through the shell, it had come to a point in his life where the question was how long until *it* broke *him*.

Maybe he could suck the coating, try to make it soft until it yielded. His teeth masticated the coatings and in time, slowly but surely, they started to break into the bitter innings of the fruit.

Jolene loved the taste of acorn butter. She would make it herself; boiling the nuts for so long that house became encapsulated by a thick, mossy odour. During these hours Tom made sure to take extra-long walks by the lake, or to occupy himself with some particularly lengthy task in the shed.

Being deadly allergic to nuts was not always convenient.