THE TROLL: A POET'S NOVELLA

by

Tom DeBeauchamp
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Martine Bellen
Wesleyan University
Poet
Where man is not nature is barren.

—William Blake

For your life had stamina
from a childhood among priests
& far in the night,
beyond the human realm, a cry
released the density of nature

—Brenda Hillman

Stories shape the world. They exist independently
of people, and in places quite devoid of man, there
may yet be mythologies. The glaciers have their
legends. The ocean bed entertains its own romances.

—The Swamp Thing
CHAPTER ONE

Snap!

Snap! Snap!

Motley Young works his 35mm camera like a pro, spins the dials, tightens the focus, balances the light. It’s another graycloud day in the northern Cascades, the sky low and thick above him in the branches of the hemlock and the Douglas fir. It’s chilly and damp, though warm for October. The morning drizzle has dried up, the sun a smear in the wool of sky.

Motley fills his first roll of film—36 exposures—in five minutes. "What the hell," he says to himself, one eye crimped, the other wide in the viewfinder. "What is going on here?"

A few yards up the trail, in a small meadow in the curve of mountains, an army of mushrooms has grown up over night. They are taller than Motley is, some even eight feet tall with caps as wide. The trail and the meadow are overrun by them, there’s no path and no clear way through. They are packed so densely, the trail, which usually offers such breathtaking views of evergreens breathing en masse in the wild wind, is walled off. Instead of the contrast of distance and finicky light, there is bumpy pale fungus. Huge meaty stalks grow from the cracks in the rocks; they hang sideways like snail eyes from the bark of the old growth trees.

Motley knows these mushrooms well. They are troll mushrooms and he is the troll warden. For
twenty years, he’s combed this section of the Cascade Mountains looking for them and the troll he knows produces them, and documenting what he’s found. He’s measured their height and breadth, all these years, noted their location, tasted them, even published a journal of his most successful recipes. By heart, he knows their habits, knows troll mushrooms seldom stand more than twelve inches high. They are a bouquet variety; in all his years of searching, he’s never found more than a dozen of them together. And yet, here are hundreds, as far up the mountains as he can see.

"What is going on here," he says again. He reloads his camera and fills the new roll with close-ups. Ordinarily smooth, the meat of the caps is pocked and brittle, dotted across their great expanses with little holes, like pin pricks.

Snap!

Snap! Snap!

Motley's job, his civic responsibility, is as defender of the town of Index, keeper of the troll—who cares if he’s never seen her—and protector of hikers and climbers of all stripes. The field of elephantine mushrooms knots his guts with dread. In an area already rife with the unexplained and strange, it is just too weird.

On his knees, he takes pictures of the mushrooms' gills, their stipes, the gray layer of troll shit out of which they grow. Because of how closely they’re planted, their caps all touch each other, forming their own canopy, a phalanx, a forest within the forest of trees.

Motley covers his camera lens with its cap and stows the camera in his fanny pack. He crawls deeper
into the mushroom forest, into its darkness cut by rays of gray sunlight, into the concentrated stink of the
troll’s presence. Several yards in, he leans back against one of the tall pink stems and breathes deeply of the
rich, sporous air.

For all of the knick-knacks and stories—the tufts of hair and interviews—he’s collected over the
years, the troll’s palpable presence is the only evidence of her existence he truly trusts. Motley likes to
imagine the troll bipedal, humanoid, with teeth and claws, maybe language and cultural practices, but he
knows that’s all imagination. Feeling her presence, and communing with it, involves no bodies, and none
of the bodily senses, but it’s not his imagination. His schnozz is working overtime, but the smell is not the
presence. The presence is the smell within the smell, and Motley breathes deep in the silence of the
mushroom hut.

The troll’s presence is a state, a feeling, a complex emotional cloud visited upon him, and as he
accepts it, as he draws it in, tears trickle down his face. His meridians, his chakras, every mystical pipeline
of energy in his body and mind explodes with sorrow and terror. A taste of celery fills the back of his throat
and his sinus.

The presence leaps from him, the channel closes, and Motley wipes his wet face with a muddy,
grimy hand and stands up. Hunched over, he walks back out of the mushroom forest, and hacks at one of
the best looking mushrooms with a curved knife. He’s always eaten the troll mushrooms—they’ve been his
gift, they’ve always been his special gift—so much so that to leave without one now would be somehow
disrespectful. It could be his last chance, he thinks.

He chooses one of the shorter mushrooms, just over six feet tall. He carries it back down the trail
over his shoulder like a moon-colored parasol. As he leaves the meadow, in the middle-ground between the mushroom forest and the regular forest, an unnatural shock of yellow catches Motley's eye. He stoops and grabs it up. It's a brand new jacket. Next to it, a cook stove and a can of gas still in its store-plastic. At the edges of the troll slime and mycelium, Motley finds the pieces of an unmade camp.

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When Motley makes it to the bottom of the trail, night is falling and the trail head is flashing red and blue with the lights of the state patrol. Two officers come up the trail as he walks down it. They eye him and his mushroom suspiciously. He can't really tell, but he reeks of troll shit. Little mushrooms he doesn't notice sprout from the creases of his jeans.

The gravel lot is swarming with cops and cop cars. Motley gently rests his troll mushroom in the bed of his truck, and looks around to see what's going on. His first thought is they're after him, but, after the difficulty he has getting anyone's attention, he changes his mind. Beyond the eight patrol cars and his tiny truck, a few of the officers are searching a white Volvo. Parked off in the corner of the lot, is a huge Winnebago. Its picnic awning is extended, and a crew of ponchoed men and women stand under it talking.

"Hey Prick," Motley says to get the attention of one of them. A chubby, middle-aged man looks up. He waves to Motley and walks over.

Prick Yoder is a local. He and Motley went to high-school together. As he walks across the parking
lot, his clear poncho reflects the flashing lights.

"Hey Motley. What's all over your face?" He blows into an open cup of gas station coffee. Drops of its brown fluid splash back in the rain.

"It's muddy up there," he says. "What's all this?"

"Some kids went missing. You been up all the way, today?" Prick asks. He points up at the peak of Mt. Index, hidden by nightfall.

"Nah, just the low Meadows today."

"See anything?"

"A bunch of gear. No kids though."

"Where's the gear now?"

"I left it." Over Prick's shoulder, Motley sees some of the other cops are staring at them.

"Too bad, then," Prick says. "The girl's dad is flipping his shit."

Static crackles in Prick's radio. He pushes the talk button, "yeah," he says. He holds up one finger, one minute. "Loud and clear, Mr. Gateskill."

Another pair of officers comes down the trail into the parking lot, the lead cop with a yellow hiker's pack—its edges glowing with reflective details—hoisted over his head.

"How many guys do you have out?" Motley asks.
"'Bout a dozen right now."

"Let me drop some stuff at home, get some dry clothes on. I'll be back up."

"Nah, no need. I think it's maybe just an overactive dad, you know? Kids lost track of time. We'll probably embarrass 'em before too long, you know what I mean?"

"Really, Prick, it's more than that. Local problems."

"Motley, we've got this covered. The girl's old man wants things quiet. He doesn't want to draw too much outside attention. He's got a platoon of his own staff in transit right now."

"Why so many people, then, if it's no big deal?"

Prick leans in, "I'm telling you, overactive father."

Motley stares Prick down, melts him with an angry look.

"I'll let him know you're concerned," Prick says. "Seriously, you know I know you're the best. I'll call you."

Under the R.V.'s awning, in the glowing, open doorway, Motley sees a man standing on the vehicle's steps. The heads of the gathered look up into that glowing light, and though Motley can't hear what's being said, it's obvious they're taking orders.

"One of the kids is Claire Gateskill," Prick says. "As in, P.A. Gateskill. The P.A. Gateskill."

"I know that name," Motley says.
"You and the rest of the world, my friend. Everybody knows that name."

CHAPTER TWO

The cops stare up at P.A. Gateskill in awe and reverence, their faces bathed in the full-spectrum light of his specialty bulbs. Here, in the doorway of an otherwise mundane recreational vehicle, is one of the earth’s prime movers, one of its wealthiest men.

"Officers," he says. "I cannot stress the urgency of our work tonight on this lonely mountainside. My dear daughter Claire has gone missing. Likewise, her companion, a boy named Alvin, is also missing. Claire is an accomplished expeditionist. She has ever been punctual. I’d expected her home this morning, and yet, as you can see, her car remains." With a grand sweep of his arm, he gestures to the Volvo Cross Country three cruisers down in the gravel lot. "I do not know the boy’s intentions. He’s a new lover, let’s be plain. I’ve met him just once, during which visit he was withdrawn and awkward. He seemed harmless to me. Let’s hope he was."

Over the mossy top of a wooden picnic table, a huge topographical map of the area has been rolled
out and pinned open with rocks. The troupe huddles around it, everyone trying to stand clear of the rain sheeting off the awning.

"You and you," P.A. says, pointing to two of the officers. He steps off from the R.V. steps and walks to the map, and jabs a finger into it. "You two look here," he says.

They nod, and off they go, into the undergrowth and off up the trail.

No one mentions the fading light.

P.A.'s right-hand man, Mort, walks down from inside the R.V. with his cell phone prominently in his hand. "We can have twenty more people by tomorrow morning."

"Thank you, Mort. I appreciate your diligence," P.A. says.

Two officers, fresh from the trail, hike over carrying a yellow bag.

"Over here!" P.A. calls, waving them over. "Here. Set it here," he says, motioning for the table. "Good work," he says, "where did you find it? Were there signs of any struggle? Damn it! The zippers are locked. Get me a tool, someone."

Mort fishes a heavy set of keys from his pocket. "Try this," he says.

P.A. opens the knife on the ring and picks at the tiny keyhole. In disgust, he throws the knife into the mud. It bounces under the R.V. and Mort runs after it quietly, without complaint.

"How about a screwdriver?" P.A. asks, feigning calm.

One of the cops hands him a pair of bolt cutters. He snips the metal end off one of the zippers.
"Easy as that," he says, smiling grandly. His rage, apparently, temporary.

Prick walks up into this disturbed quiet.

"How's it coming," he asks. He's ignored. The other officers keep their eyes on P.A., P.A. keeps his eyes inside the pack.

If P.A. had been expecting personal items, he'd been mistaken. The pack contains only lightly used—practically brand new—hiking gear. There's a tent, a sleeping bag, rope still in its cardboard sleeve, and dried food, but nothing whatsoever to identify the pack as Claire's.

"Mr. Gateskill, sir," Prick says. "That was Motley Young. He knows the woods here better than anybody. He's led all kinds of search and rescue efforts over the years. Anyway, he offered his help. Anything you need, he'll be happy to oblige. I'll certainly vouch for him. He's a good one to have on this kind of mission."

"Yoder, you've got to be effing kidding me. Motley Young? That stoner? Give me a break!" one of the other cops says.

"Yeah, Prick. The guy's a felon. You know how many times I busted him for growing weed up on the North Fork?"

"Well he ain't no hardened criminal Petri," Prick says. "He's had his brushes with the law, but that's a long time ago, and anyway, you tell me, who's the guy who knows this area of the world better'n anyone else?"

"Well, sure," the cop says, "It's Motley, but you can't trust him."
"Let's not forget," the first guy says, "He's a devil worshipper."

"He's not. That's just stupid," Prick says.

"It is not. The guy's always casting spells, and bleeding on things. I've seen it Prick. He's into demons. He's into fairies and elves and trolls and all of it."

"Mr. Gateskill," Prick says, "Motley's a good guy. He'll help you find your daughter. He can—"

"I think," P.A. says, "We'll keep the group small, just some of my associates."

That night, a caravan from the city arrived, subcompact car after subcompact car lining the edge of the highway. They ran three search patrols throughout the night.

P.A. told them before they went out, "Don't be afraid to call out to her. If she hears you, she might respond."
CHAPTER THREE

Claire shivers, wherever the hell she is, a few feet off the trail, and Alvin, who knows where Alvin is. Maybe gone for help.

She’s blind. She can’t move. She can’t scream for help, but if she really wriggles, she has the feeling of rolling over, and over and over if she wriggles hard enough. Until exhaustions stops her, she tumbles forward, into some darkness she can’t know and doesn’t remember.

"Where the hell am I?"

Her mother died. That’s part of the puzzle, she thinks. Her mother died, years ago, and then there was the boy. The man. Alvin. He is with her. No, where is he?

Back up. Before the boy, the man, there was chanting and screaming and anger and sulphur smells in the public square. She was a student; there was a student action. She and the other students—what, they walked together holding hands, then fell to earth when the foaming canisters came roaring in. Bubblegum pink, the teargas ripping through their solidarity. One girl, Claire remembers on repeat, stood standing, shouting the slogans they’d all written as a group in a rented room, and some arm reached out from behind
his plate glass riot shield and sprayed a cone of orange pepper into her open throat. She collapsed and Claire couldn’t tell, running away past her, if it was the pepper spray coming back out of her mouth, or if it was blood. If the body could rupture so quickly, Claire didn’t know.

Moaning and sorrow came from all around, chaos like a stormy sea, and Claire lost her feet. A canister cracked the pavement beside her head, and ricocheted off to hurt someone else, someone less lucky, and someone hoisted her up. A nun she knew, her friend, Margaret, held her steady. She felt a tug at the base of her neck, something pulling her free of all this.

"Claire," Margaret said, "we've got to get you out of here."

The tide of the protest shifted. The people, none of whom she could recognize as her friends, ran, back the way they’d come from, chased by men and women with shields and batons. She watched it all as if on a screen.

She ran with Margaret. The air behind them filled with rubber bullets and heat from the fire burning a nearby warehouse down. The fire like a sunset she remembers now at the horizon of the darkness of night.

So much darkness between that sprawling square and the vacuum of wherever she is now. She has the taste of dirt on her tongue. The sudden sour smell of rotting leaves lets her know she is alive. The western mountain, dark in silhouette, she feels its skin of forest. A vein on the back of her hand, she feels it jump, rushing with blood.

The boy’s name is Alvin, she thinks. She loves him. They are in love. A thought that makes her
laugh. Alvin who? She knows she knows but it’s impossible to remember.

What’s the name of something you eat? A fruit or a seed?

A tickle at the wrist describes her wrist. An ant. Another ant. Another, and a line of ants. Rain falls, and even cocooned she feels the rain fall, feels it leak through the papery shell of darkness surrounding her.

She feels her body shift on sand. She feels the deep plates under the crust of the earth grind together.

The rain splashes the ants on her wrist and the ants go sailing.

She calls out his name, "Alvin!" An empty epic unfolds between her voice and brain.

They’d been hiking. They’d been separated.


She’d spent the night in the nun’s tiny studio, shivering as if with fever. There were sirens. Loud angry voices. Insomnia. Margaret brewed valerian root tea and was kind to her. "Try to rest," she said.

Margaret had prayed on her knees while Claire pretended to sleep. The small room, the smell of the afghan. The firmness of the mattress. Shelves full of books, and Margaret praying. When the kettle whistled, Margaret struggled to her feet. She limped into the kitchen and raised the kettle from the stove. Her leg was numb from kneeling.

Claire’s legs are numb now. Is she kneeling?

"I don’t know what happened back there," Claire said the next morning, on leaving Margaret’s apartment and the long hallucination of the past twenty four hours.
Margaret walked her to the building’s front door and stood with her in the vestibule. It was an old building, with a weak lock, and Margaret wanted to make sure it closed properly. "Feels like a necessary precaution," she said, "on a day like today." They stood on the front stoop of a pretty morning, a little brisk, though more from lack of sleep than from anything in the atmosphere. Golden light filtered through the canopy of ficus trees lining the narrow, old street. Margaret hugged her, and said, "go home, get some proper sleep. I'll call you. Surely, we won't stand for this. Obviously, we'll have some kind of counter-attack. When I know where we're meeting, who's in jail, who's in the hospital, I'll let you know."

"Okay," Claire said. The last thing she wanted was another night like that, consumed by fire and rage, awash with forces beyond her. She couldn't bear it. Walking home, even the sounds of traffic had her trembling, eyes puddled with tears.

She showered quickly, packed a tiny bag, and drove away.

Leaving her neighborhood, she nearly ran a boy over as he jogged across the street.

"Sorry," she said, wiping her face. So many tears kept leaking from her.

The boy waved her on, looking over his shoulder as if pursued.

"No," she said. "I really am sorry. Really."

He stopped in the middle of the street, struck by something though not her car. He looked back at her, looked back to tell her not to worry, but said nothing, just stood there, the two of them locked in gazetime. Cars collected at the stop-signs. Someone honked a horn, shouted, "Get a room already!"

"You should get in," Claire said. She didn't know him, but, then again, on some level she must
have known him. It wouldn’t make sense otherwise. She felt like she knew him.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

More of the drivers now honked their horns. "Come on!"

"Hiking," she said. "I’m going now. You should get in the car."

"I don’t have any gear," he said. "Everything's gone," he said.

"Perfect," she said.

A car crossed the intersection, slowly, the driver’s arm extended, middle finger up, mean eyes staring the two of them down as he rolled by.

"You should get in," she said again.

So he did.

She bought him fresh boots, a new jacket, a shirt and a real pair of pants. They bought a tent to share. They bought a stove, a knife, a hatchet, flashlights, lanterns. They went nuts, and she put it all on her no-limit credit card.

Outside of the tiny expedition shop at the foot of Mt. Shasta, they held each other for the first time.

"This is really wild," he said.

"It’s surreal, isn’t it?"

"I’m just overwhelmed," he said.
"It’s been an impulsive few hours."

They drove up to Mt. Shasta, parked and hiked a few miles. They pitched the tent.

That night she said, "Do you feel that?"

"Yes. What is that?"

It was a tug at the neck, and it was strong enough to pull them further and further north. Two days later they crossed into Oregon.

She called her father. "We'll be there soon."

"Me and my friend."

"Alvin," she said to her father on the phone.

"Alvin," she says now, rain soaking through whatever it is that’s covering her, giving her back her skin. He’s nearby. She can feel him. Somewhere, his presence burns like a match.
CHAPTER FOUR

As on their trip north, Claire drove from her father’s house in Seattle up to the trail in the mountains she was so desperate to show him. Though Alvin had only known her for a week or so, he’d never seen her so animated.

"You are going to love this!" she said. She drummed the steering wheel in traffic, anxious to be out of the city. She was wild inside her seatbelt.

North of Everett she turned east from I-5 to Highway 2. The earth, sunken under the recent rain, reflected the trees and clouds.
"It’s beautiful out here," she said, "isn’t it?"

"Definitely," he said. "I really love all the gray, and all the brown."

"And the green, too, right?" she offered.

It was all pretty drab to him, honestly. It was the gloomiest day in recent memory, and, after the week, he was ping-ponging back and forth between instincts to get the hell away from this whole crazy experience, and instincts that told him here was the place for him, and that he should just sit tight. Whenever he got really wild for leaving, they’d end up in that crazy eye-contact thing. In the tractor beam of that look, he cold recognize the madness of the expedition, the genuine purposelessness of it, but he was nevertheless powerless to change course.

As their feet got colder on the floor mats, as the elevation increased, and the flat, wet land jutted into mountains, Claire went quiet. She sat erect in her seat, stared forward into the gray gold of the cloudy morning.

"Claire," he asked. "You okay?" but she was in a trance. He snapped his fingers, but she said nothing, didn’t even blink.

The radio flickered with static when the road curved around the north face of the mountains. The Skykomish raced through the alder alongside the highway, and when they pulled off the road onto a wide gravel shoulder, Alvin felt an enormous sense of relief. His legs were shaking when he stepped out of the car to stretch.

"We’re here," she said. "Home sweet home."
She pulled her pack out of the trunk of the car, threw the pack on over her shoulders and set out, Alvin still stretching his hamstrings, the trunk still open.

Alvin hears her shout, "Isn't this wonderful!" but the trees are too thick for him to see her.

His friends back home were probably pissed at him. He hadn't answered their calls in a week, hadn't checked his messages or even turned the damn phone on. They were after him for money, threatening him with violence. It was all a misunderstanding, he was sure, nothing he couldn't work through with a few cups of tea and some real empathy.

Coming up here had seemed like the kind of kismet he just couldn't turn down. He needed to get out of town for awhile. Voila. Claire pulled up and they drove away. It'd been a wild ride, but now he was starting to have second thoughts. Here he was, standing in a gravel pit off a highway thousands of miles from his own problems about to chase after a girl he hardly knew, and yet, he had no choice. He had to follow her. Something pre-animal in his subplantae cortex slithered him into the straps of his pack, and dragged him up the wet and muddy trail.

"Claire?" he said as he entered the forest. He heard footsteps ahead. He saw an outline in the trees, but no voice reciprocated.

"Claire?" he asked again after a few minutes. "Wait up, okay?"

Still no response, but with a few deep breaths of forest air, he relaxed. This is wild, he decided, and anyway, the trail only goes two ways: you're either going up the mountain, he thought, or you're going back down again. Why not follow it? It was perfectly safe.
He walked by ferns and thistle, yellow flowers he’d often seen in wallpaper but had never been able
to name. A chipmunk skittered across the trail, and he was sure he heard an owl hooting from some one
branch in the vastness of branches. It was pretty great. Claire was right, and the farther he walked into the
woods, the happier he felt, the bigger his smile. Every hundred or so yards, he called her name, but on the
whole felt pretty confident in his equipment, and in himself as a woodsman. How hard could it be? If he
just turned around, he’d be back at the car in no time.

After solo hiking for an hour or so, the trail forked.

"Well, shit," he said. "Claire? This isn’t funny."

Uncertain which way to go, he paced in a circle in the small clearing of the fork. He called for her,
but got responses only from the wind and branches, the sound of falling water. He pulled his phone out of
his pocket and considered turning it on. The face of it reflected the shaggy silhouette of the Douglas fir all
around him. "Screw it," he said, and shoved the phone back into his pocket and eenie-meenie-minie-moed
himself out of the clearing and onto the trail’s south fork.

The trees gave way to a vast meadow of tall grasses, big boulders, and colorful wildflowers. Alvin
picked a small wreath of what he had to call daisies—for Claire, of course; he’d give them to her when he
saw her—and wandered a little way from the path to eat his lunch. All the fresh air and exercise had made
him hungry.

If too much time passed, and she still hadn’t turned up, he decided, he’d turn around and wait back
at the trailhead. Whatever the misunderstanding had been, they’d figure it out from there. Eventually she’d
have to come back to the car. He had the tent. More than likely, this was just some sort of game, one
whose rules he didn’t yet understand.

As he ate a stick of natural smoked salmon jerky, some movement in the field caught his eye. Off to
his left an enormous white mushroom started growing. As if in time-lapse photography, it grew inches
every minute. Within ten minutes, it was six feet tall. His mouth full, too distracted to continue with the
complex process of mastication, Alvin just stared at it swaying in the meadow breeze. From the mounded
earth around it, three other mushrooms started growing at the same remarkable speed.

"Oh my god," he said, and, leaving his salmon jerky on the boulder he'd been using for a chair, ran
over to the first of the mushrooms.

Alvin knows a thing or two about fungus. He'd hunted all kinds with his family as a boy, and any
gaps in his knowledge were filled in by the hours he'd spent in the last year pouring over catalogue after
catalogue, preparing for the grand opening of his Wild Life Foods Co-op—that same star-crossed
corporation over which his ass had so nearly been kicked. These looked exactly like trumpet mushrooms,
only thousands of times too big. Trumpets were edible, of course, but, these were wild, and weird, and his
first thought was to be careful. To go back to his salmon jerky.

He took his phone out of his pocket, and pressed the button to bring it back to life. "Screw it," he
said. Something told him, something inside him communicated to him, that these were safe. The
mushrooms seduced him. He reached up and tore a piece of the cap of the first mushroom. It was firm as a
portobello.

It was delicious.
What if he could sell these, he thought. What if he could corner the market on these crazy mushrooms. He could be back in business in no time. He took a step back and aimed his phone to take a picture of the mushrooms. All around the first batch, new groups had sprouted. He snapped a few pictures before a cloud crossed the sun and spilled shadow over the field. He reached out for another bite, but a pain burst in his gut, his vision dazzled, and he fell to the ground, unconscious.

**MOTLEY’S INTERLUDE**

Motley and the troll crossed paths for the first time when Motley was still in high-school.

He’d been out among the trees, completely alone, exactly like he liked it. He hadn’t seen another human being the whole time, hadn’t said one word in English the whole time, and hadn’t once thought about going home. No one was waiting for him at home. No one was waiting for him anywhere. In the mountains he was no more alone than he was in the town, and up there his fires always lit and his tent was always dry, and nothing more mattered very much to him.

Motley didn’t make plans. He’d bring a handful of food with him, and just see how long he could make it last, how far it could go. The best trips, he felt, were the ones where air, by the end of things, was all he ate. How long could he go like that before sorrow set in?

On the fourth day of this particular outing, he was down to a handful of nuts. He walked, a little woozy from hunger, along a secret trail he’d cut himself the previous summer. Under a clump of ferns, he found the tallest, butteriest mushrooms he’d ever seen. He cut down three of them like a pro and dragged
them back to camp. Greedily, he ate one raw, not concerned in the least if they were poisonous or not. They didn't feel poisonous to him.

The next morning, as he climbed free of his tent, he nearly crushed the bird’s nest he found lovingly placed at the mouth of it. In addition to some bird shit and feathers, the nest was filled with three eggs. Three eggs!

Not ten minutes later, Motley had a fire going, the eggs cooking over a huge handful of the strange mushrooms. The smell they made was perfect and, for a man who swore hunger was part of his goal, the charge he got off his good fortune was unnameable. He offered up his thanks randomly, his mouth full of food. "Thank you spirits of the forest! I love you, beautiful rushing river!"

After wiping the pan clean with his fingers, he rinsed everything in the river, killed the fire, and decided staying any longer would be an insult to his good tidings. He blessed the spot spontaneously as he left. He kissed the trees and drew a circle in the dirt where the nest had been.

The morning continued to rain grace down on him. A spotted doe followed after him awhile and touched her nose to his. He found a shallow lake warm enough he went for a swim. On the sunny side of the mountain, as the sun set, he watched more geese than he’d ever seen fly by honking, black figures against the purple of the fading light.

That night, still a few days hike from town, he woke in a cold sweat to a barnyard smell, like a horse or a cow, something heavy and unwashed. In the moon glow, he heard the trees rustling, echoing over the valley floor. The moon lit the side of his tent. A shadow, like a puppet show, leapt across it. Through the slit door of the tent, he saw a flash of eyes, the cut of a face, gazing back at him. He stared out into that
shadow, and that shadow stared into the tent into him.

Gradually, the smell faded. Morning turned the sky blue, and Motley turned back down the trail.

The whole way down the mountain he could taste the eggs and mushrooms, delirious for them as he went hungry again, seeing flashes of those eyes behind every rock, in every stand of trees.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Hello!" Vera calls from the kitchen.

"Hello!" Motley calls back from the foyer. To get his muddy boots off he has to lay the enormous mushroom stalk and its broken cap on the floor.
"You bring me any mushrooms?" she asks.

"Like you've never seen before," he yells back.

"Good," she says. "I've been waiting to make dinner." She walks into the foyer. "What is this?" she asks, clearly taken aback by the white whale of a mushroom taking up so much of the entry way. She squats down, picks up one half of the broken cap, examines its gill-work. "You can't be serious," she says.

"Right?" Motley says. "There were hundreds just like this." He pulls his boot off and sets it next to a pile of other shoes.

"Don't put that there," she says. "God, you're filthy. You need a bath." She plugs her nose and waves her hand against the stench. "Let's get this outside."

She leads him through a side door off the foyer into their backyard. With the sun setting, the backyard is a little like a haunted playground, Vera's metal yard animals all around, their pinwheel limbs spinning in the little breeze.

She opens the spigot connected to the house and uncoils the hose. "Set everything there," she says, spraying a patch of grass.

He drops his boots where indicated and says, "I couldn't believe my eyes, Vera. This is like Godzilla, right? Like the incredible hulk. Something very strange is going on here. What's that? Oh sure," he says and holds the stalk up like a wizard's staff for her to spray it. "The feeling I got. It was overwhelming. Something very bad is happening," he says. He lays the stalk down on their little cement patio, and holds up the two halves of the mushroom's cap.
Vera sprays them and says, "Motley, we've always known these things were—you know—supernatural. Maybe this is some kind of a fluke, or something. My senses are blowing up right now. I can't say it's not normal, you know? It never was. But. This is different for sure. Take your clothes off."

Motley unbuttons his shirt. "Here's the worst thing," he says. She blasts him with the hose. "Oh, that is cold."

"Sorry," she says. "You’re covered in shit."

Motley cringes against the cold. He says, "two kids went missing last night."

"You think they're related? Pants."

Shivering now, Motley takes off his pants. "I found gear in the mushrooms. It could all be a coincidence, but that's not the feeling I get."

"You know what?" she says. "Turn. I don’t think I’m going to eat this thing."

"That’s fine. God, it’s Cold!"

Vera throws the hose to the ground. "Go take a shower, get warm—come here," she says, looking at him funny.

"What is it?" he asks, and walks to her.

She snaps the little mushroom off of his nose where it was growing, and shows it to him. "Turn around." As he does she scopes out his body. She plucks another tiny mushroom from his calf and one from the base of his neck. He flinches each time. Bolts of pain course through his body.
"There's some elm essence in the bathroom," she says. "Rub that into your skin."

Motley pulls the cork from the brown-glass jar of elm essence and breathes it in deeply, a sweet, astringent smell. He daubs some of the clear fluid into a cloth rag and wipes his stinging face. In the mirror over the sink he can see that his face and his chest are slashed with shiny red rashes. The elm cools them, but just the slightest bit. Still shivering from the hose, he draws a steaming bath and while the tub fills picks the rubber bands out of his braid and leaves them in a dish by the sink. He unties his clarity crystal medallion and unbuckles his leather strength-rune bracelet. He pours a healthy blue dose of the elm essence into the tub and swirls the water around with his hand to mix it. He pinches off a little mushroom growing out from under the nail of his big toe, and throws it into the toilet.

He climbs into the tub and lays back and sighs because it’s so relaxing, but thoughts of the strangers gone missing on the mountain return to him. The likelihood that Gateskill and the others will find them seems pretty good. They have a lot of people looking, but they don’t know what they’re looking for, what they’re up against.

He gently pats his face with the bath water. His skin all over feels tight as if bound up in ultra fine netting, but it’s especially tight around the rashes on his cheeks.

Vera keeps a large collection of brown, light-proof jars around the tub, some blank, but most labelled with masking tape, with names like "Relaxation Medley." He dabs a washcloth with something called "Serenity" and lays it over his eyes. A drop of water drips from the shower head and fills the room with sound. Such a quiet noise, he thinks, so loud when nothing else is going on.
His knee rises above the waterline. With his arm resting on the edge of the tub, he scoops handfuls of water over his knee. On one of his revolutions, he bumps into a mushroom, he lifts the washcloth off one eye and sees it there, growing from his knee, like a palm tree on a desert island. He grabs the stipe and pulls straight up. Instead of pulling the mushroom loose, his knee is pulled upward or, rather, a copy of his knee is pulled upward. His knee, his original knee, is right where it had been, but over it, like some kind of bridge was another knee with the mushroom growing out of its patella. This new knee has a few inches of thigh and shin, each blending into the shin and thigh below it.

He tugs the mushroom again, and his new leg gets longer. He can almost see ankle. Another tug on the mushroom releases a fully-formed foot, a brand new leg, perfectly complete and identical to the old one. The new leg flexes itself and waves around.

"Things just got a bit more complicated," Motley says, three-legged and wearing only a towel, as he walks into the dining room.

Vera wears a cowled, black velvet robe, embroidered with stars. She walks around the dining room lighting yellow and blue candles.

"You're just full of surprises," she says.

On their dining room table, which is long with fourteen chairs pushed-in around it, Vera has the mushroom laid out like a patient on an operating room table. The two halves of its cap lean against it. The
candles Vera lights, fill out the remaining area of the table.

"Just a second," she says, and lights the last twenty candles. The room glows orange, and is striped with shadows, like a tiger.

Outside, Motley can see through the sliding glass door that connects the dining room to the backyard that Vera's iron cauldron hangs over a raging bonfire.

"Okay," she says, "let me see this." She kneels in front of Motley's doubled right leg. She tickles him behind both knees. He twitches each time. She tickles the bottoms of both feet and they curl and scrunch and Motley almost giggles.

"Quit it," he says.

She grabs a hold of the mushroom at his knee.

Motley says, "Don't pull it!"

And she gives it a gentle tug, the leg slides free up to the pelvis. Suddenly animated, it starts stamping on the tile floor, trying desperately to run away, free of Motley's body.

"Hold it!" Vera yells. She grabs the chalice of salt from her magic-desk and starts chanting. "Hold still," she says. Motley, balanced on his left leg, holds his two right legs, as they fight for control.

Vera pours the salt on Motley's new knee and rubs it in around the kneecap. The mushroom falls off in her hand, and Motley's new leg goes dormant, stops struggling.

"Why don't you go hop in the cauldron," she says. "I think maybe the elm wasn't enough."
"Another bath?" Motley says. The feeling in his new leg is gone. The weight of it yanks him into a slouch.

"Trust me," she says. "We'll have some more ingredients this time."

For hours, Vera cuts away handfuls of the enormous mushroom. She rolls them in a bowl of powdered crystals, carries them from the house into the yard, and breaks them apart into the steaming cauldron where Motley rests.

"How's the leg?" she asks.

"Still there. Vera," Motley says, "I think I'm boiling."

"You're not. Keep pressing on that leg. I think it should slide back in." She chants with each handful of mushrooms, and ladles a cup of the steaming broth over Motley's head. As the night goes on and the fluid condenses it thickens and grows more viscous, like a pudding or a jelly.

When the last of the mushroom is gone, Vera rolls up the paper she'd laid out under it to protect the wood of the table, and she feeds the paper to the fire, the dying fire. It smokes mightily in great, gray plumes.

"That's all I've got Motley," Vera says. "Come on out." She helps him climb free of the cauldron.

"The leg's gone," he says. He points to it floating on the soup.
"I see that," Vera says, exhausted. She uncoils the garden hose once more. "Ready?"

He nods, and she sprays him, blasting the purple goop off his skin and into the yard. It’s a cold relief, for Motley, after all those hours of heat.

As he towels dry in the dining room she tells him, "We should be pretty safe now. I just need to feed the porridge to a pig, so I guess that’s what I’ll do tomorrow."

The candles on the table are burnt down to nubs. After ten minutes of blowing them out, they go to bed.

By morning their yard, and all of their neighbors’ yards, are overgrown with the fungus.

* 

The paved road gives way to gravel, gravel turns to mud. In the fog and drizzle of the next morning, where the road bends, a bright orange raincoat points a Mag-Lite, and Motley, blinded by it, slams on his breaks. He cranks down his window. His engine idles angrily. From the truck’s frail, old speakers, Jerry Garcia’s guitar noodles up to ‘Dark Star’s peak, one of Motley’s favorite moments on this particular cassette, the Port Chester concert of February 23rd, 1971.

"Good morning, ranger," Motley says as the raincoat comes forward. The guy is, of course, no ranger. His flannel shirt is pressed and brand new, his aura uncertain. His wool cap is nothing like the
"Road’s closed," the young man says. He draws a three-point turn in the air. "You’ll have to turn around," he says.

"How come?" Motley asks, but the guy just points his light at an orange and white reflective barricade blocking the road a little farther up the path.

"Important business," the guy says. "Should be open again soon."

"If this is about the two kids," Motley says, "I’m up here to help. I’m friends with Prick Yoder. He’s a sheriff’s deputy, and I know he’s working with you guys. Believe me, kiddo, I’m the one guy you want up here."

"Listen, I’m just doing what I’m told. We need to keep a lid on this road. It’s safer that way. I’m sorry, but that’s how it is."

"Don’t you think that’s kind of bullshit? I mean, pardon me, but that doesn’t make any sense. You all don’t know the first thing about it up here," Motley says, and kills the engine. He gets out and walks past the raincoat and grabs one end of the barricade. "Listen, I know things you couldn’t even begin to believe if I told you," he said, still feeling raw from being boiled alive, his cheeks still gross and rashy.

"Don’t do that," the kid says, but Motley does it anyway. He swings the barricade off the road and climbs back into his little truck.

He cranks the engine and throws the transmission in gear. Just out of habit, he checks his gauges in the dash, and when he looks up, six orange reinforcements, now with rifles across their chests, stand like a
wall before him, their belt buckles tapping the truck's metal grill.

From the bushes a gunless man appears. He is taller than the others, better shaven with closer cropped hair, a "Member's Only" jacket worn over a primary-color polo. His wristwatch holds sunlight like an overflowing pitcher. He chews from a banana while he walks. Powerful jaws. He sticks his head into the cab of Motley's truck, and says, "Road's closed, okay?" He points back down the road and Motley’s gut drops, his neck flushes.

"This is public road," Motley says. "You can't—" SNAP!

P.A. strikes his fingers together like flint and steel, inches from Motley's face. "Hush," he says. "Don’t say a word more about the attributes of this road. This road is closed. Turn around, and get the hell out of here."

On the tape, "Dark Star," fugues into "Bird Song." It's a version Motley talks about with great reverence, one of the reasons he's come back to these Port Chester concerts, why this particular tape has been spinning through his cassette player for the last month and a half. Suddenly embarrassed by the noodling guitars and passionate vocals, he turns the volume down so low only the click of the plastic in the player, the winding of the magnetic tape itself, asserts itself.

"Listen," Motley says. "I know you have important work to do. I'm empathetic, but you've got to believe me, I've got important work to do too, and you can't just close the mountain. This is public land. You don't have any authority up here."

"You work up here?"
"Yeah."

"You're a lumberjack?"

"No. You wouldn't understand if I told you."

"I know you," P.A. says. "You're some druggy little twerp who thinks the whole world revolves around him. But it doesn't. It doesn't today, and not while I'm looking for my daughter, alright?"

"Man, I want to help you with your daughter."

"Hundred bucks? How 'bout that?"

"What?"

"You want a reward, right? That's what you're after. Your grow operation's gonna be fine for a few days."

"No, no. That's not it. You people are messing with things you don't understand at all. I just want to help you."

P.A. shoves a hundred dollar bill into Motley's face. "Two hundred?" he says. "Is that better? Pretty good reward for just staying home."

Motley pushes P.A.'s hand away, or tries to. "Your daughter, man, is in some serious danger. You need my help. Don't be stupid."

P.A. grabs Motley by the collar and pushes him into the bench seat until he is still. The two men lock eyes. Motley relaxes, shows his palms, and P.A. lets him go, and steps back from the truck. "What do
you know about my daughter, huh?”

Motley shifts the truck into reverse, and drives the three-point route the raincoat had drawn back down the mountain.

At the stop sign on his way back to town, before pulling onto Highway 2, he reaches down to the floor mat and picks up the two bills. In the excitement they’d fallen to the floor.
Claire hurdled a fallen log. She sprinted up a rocky switchback. A few loose rocks caused her to slip. She banged her knee a bit, but, no worse for wear. She picked herself back up, and, brilliant smile enough to smite the gloom of the afternoon, kept running up the mountain, up the trail.

The air was so fresh! When had she had air so fresh? Never mind she’d been free and hiking Shasta less than a week ago, her heart pounded in her chest in pure, loving adoration for the very nexus and source of fresh air on the planet. Halfway up the mountain she paused. She felt the damp chill of the atmosphere battle the heat radiating from her body. She was high enough up the mountain that a cloud lay over the treetops below her. "Oh, my little mountains," she said, feeling giddy and strange. She paused for a few minutes, not long enough to remove her pack, but long enough to catch her breath.

"Up here, Alvin!" she called, remembering she had a companion. Her voice ricocheted between the rock faces, decaying after awhile into wind sound and a bird’s shriek. At first no more than a black speck against the gray sky, a falcon quickly materialized. A few hundred feet up, she could make out the detail on his breast, could admire the arc of his wings, curved for descent, could see the rabbit writhing in his talons.

Claire turned a corner of the trail. The switchbacks ended, the trail reverted to an open, rocky plateau, wider spaces between the evergreens. She stood on a boulder looking down, clouds below, clouds above.

"Alvin!" she called, assuming her voice would travel to him wherever he was. On some level she
knew she’d left him behind, and she felt guilt for this, but the guilt paled next to the bizarre euphoria of simply being in the forest.

Ahead, farther up the path, there was an ancient maple tree, its leaves burning red, practically glowing in contrast to the grayness of everything else around. It hunched over, while the other trees around it stood straight as rods. Its many branches twisted and veered, like medusa heads or a wrestler with many arms. All around its base, piles of its bright red leaves had fallen. The piles burst with each of her steps. The wind caught them, and they sailed over the edge of the cliff.

"You're out of place," she said to the tree as she got close.

"Well," she said, answering an unasked question, "you're the only one here like you."

A hard, sideways wind blew through, scattering the leaf piles, bending the branches of the maple dramatically, and whipping Claire's hair loose of its tie. "No. I meant no disrespect," she said, and gathered her hair back at the base of her neck.

"He's around here somewhere," she said, and turned her back on the tree.

A flying leaf hit the side of her face, and blocked her vision from her right eye. Other leaves hit her and collected along her arms and chest and throat. Try as she might, she couldn't brush them off. Whenever she pulled one loose, a dozen more took its place.

She turned back to the maple to demand an explanation, but the falcon was there, perched on one of the tree's arms. The rabbit, still in the falcon's talons, no longer struggled, but hung limp and dead.

"What's the idea here?" she asked, her voice wavering with fear. She kept her hands up against the
wind, protecting her good eye.

"No, it's not like that!" she said, stumbling backward.

The falcon dropped the rabbit and flapped down to the earth, a few paces from Claire.

"It's not like that," she said again. "This is where I belong."

The falcon flapped his wings, two big flaps, sending more and more of the never ending supply of leaves after Claire. She fended them off as best she could with just her hands. From the bushes, she grabbed a stick, one of the maple's own fallen branches and, gripping it with both hands, charged the falcon. He flew toward her, his sharp talon's stretched out toward her, but before she could swing the stick and before the bird could peck out her eyes, a leaf fastened over Claire's face and knocked her to the ground.

She felt other leaves cover her, layer after layer. She was paralyzed by them, blinded by them, but could nevertheless feel each new leaf as it landed and adhered. She heard the falcon shriek. Something sharp—a beak, or a claw—broke the skin at the base of her neck and dug into her brain.
Step one was mental. To give the earth the scrub it needed required a personal mental shift.
Required disrupting your own rickety scaffolding. You had a city in you plugged in and more wired than the state-of-the-artiest fiber-optic command center imaginable. Driving in gridlock, standing brutally in line, the 2500 calorie diet, hohos, little debbies, the hoverround scooter, the rascal, the hopeless knock-offs of all shapes and origins, knock-off sunglasses, knock-off hand-bags, knock-off culture. All culture is knock-off culture and that is why Alvin runs. The one way out is in. Invoke the tiger. Find your wild heart. Forget the cage of culture. It’s a wrapper on a wrapper on a wrapper all wrapped up. That’s the kind of life. The only other way is this one.

Alvin bombs down the hill, down the sidewalk, adjacent traffic and he doesn’t care. With his little black mesh shorts, his bright yellow sneaks, a terry cloth towel bouncing like a tail. A sheen of sweat is Alvin’s only container.

In your heart you have an almond in your center, an almond of fury and passion and desire. This is your wild heart, this little almond. If we’re going to explode our captivations and dismiss our trainers our own wildness must pulse with the blood of our dreams! Our wildness must turn our cage space into wilderness. Wildness into wilderness, wildness into wildness. Let the wrapper tear. You’re like a seed that’s gone to germ. Just ride that feeling!

Alvin hurdles a city trashcan, high-fives an ancient old sailor and bobs and weaves and jukes his way through the rage of a rush-hour intersection. King of frogger, he hops and he bounces when he reaches the other side, arms raised up in fists for victory.

Amplify your power. That comes from within. That comes from you. But just like the little lowly seed needs sunshine and cool water if it’s ever gonna sprout, so the wild heart needs wild energy to power
its wild body. Enter Wild Life Foods Coop—a sustainable system for outgrowing The System.

Such was the dream, but how o how to cultivate your Eden? You can’t. Human alone can barely survive. It takes community to survive. So it was that Alvin summoned before him his six closest friends (those, that is, with the liquidest capital) and riffed at them the future.

On his walk back up the hill, toward home Alvin watched his pecs flex in the empty window of a vacant storefront. This is where it would begin. Gotta keep it moving. Gotta keep that almond growing.

This is for the wildness wrapped up inside all of us, he’d told his six backers. People are sick. What happens to a fire without fuel? he asked them. What happens? Damn right that’s what happens. It goes out. Pft! Smoke. Cold. Death.

He promised them 40% growth in the first four years and enough profits to more than cover everyone’s tuition.

Deal! and they’d all signed up and wrote him checks there on the spot. He signed the lease the next day, ordered equipment, produce, etc. etc. etc. It was all happening so quickly, a wild dream. A wild, waking reality.

Alvin’s building is two blocks from the storefront. On the stoop—a sight he literally jumps into the air upon seeing—are six cardboard boxes he knows are his! There are so many boxes he has trouble getting them through the front door and down to his apartment. He has none of the same problems with his own door, however. He doesn’t even have to use the key. His door hangs open.

"Come on in, Alvin. The door is open. But I guess you knew that. Hey Alvin." It’s Reed. And with
him the five other member-owners. His friends. His backers. They stand around. They've obviously been
waiting for him. Andy is in the kitchen looking into his refrigerator.

"Hey guys," Alvin says, dropping the box of kale next to the door.

"Hot out there?" Reed asks.

"Yeah, well I just did ten miles. Why are you in my house?"

"Wild. Listen," Reed says. "We've got to have a chit-chat." The other member-owners stare either
at the ceiling or the floor.

"What do you mean?" Alvin says. But he can feel it in his gut. He knows they've got bad news.

"You want to sit down? No? Okay, it is your house. You lied to us, Alvin. We're cashing out. Right
now thank you."

"Lied to you?" Alvin said. At the very idea, his wild flame fizzled. "How did I lie to you."

"Your little papers, remember? With the graphs and the promises? Well they don't add up. I talked
to my dad, Al. And he says you're a liar."

"Guys, that's not true. That's not true at all," Alvin said.

"Just give us the money. You bought some kale. Have a potluck, Alvin. Call the whole thing off."

"I can't do that. I've filed licenses. We've got a two year lease."

"You'll be out a few grand maybe. Better than the alternative."
"What do you mean?"

"Reed come on," Isaiah said.

"No. We agreed. We all agreed. Remember, we did that?"

"I think we can be a little more civilized, Reed. That’s all."

"We can't do this," Alvin said. "You can't."

"Isaiah," Reed said. "We talked about this." Reed made eye contact with all of the other members-owners. "Okay? Okay?" Hearing no dissent he turned on Alvin. "Either we go to the bank right now, or we kick your teeth in."

"What?"

"I know, wild, right?" Reed gave a fake smile and swept in to touch his face to Alvin’s. "Just like we talked about," Reed said to the others.

"I can’t believe you guys discussed this," Alvin said, backing up from the sour smell of Reed’s breath. "Nestor? Really?" The others walked toward the two of them slowly, tentatively, and Reed shoved Alvin’s sweat-slimed chest. He tumbled backward over the boxes of produce, breaking one of them open, spilling the plastic tubs of hummus in the hallway.

"It’s not too late," Reed said.

You can pour water over the wild flame, but you cannot extinguish the wild flame. Just when you think it’s out, it flames up some place else. The wild heart cannot be contained. It burns up its containers.
It strikes out in new directions.

This was Alvin's inner monologue as he jumped up and ran down the hallway of his building and back out into the sunshine.

"He'll be back," Reed said, as he ran, but Alvin knew as he hit the door and sprinted up the tree-lined street that there was no way he was coming back. What could the wild man do without the energy to sustain him? What was there here for him with his community strangled in its cradle?

He ran one last time past the storefront. This too was just a wrapper he decided, seeing himself reflected in the window, the shop vac with its lazy hose stretched across the floor.

Without a goodbye or anything to commemorate what could have been, Alvin sprinted into the intersection, into the screeching of a white Volvo deliriously coming to rest.

The girl behind the wheel, afrighted in the extreme, rolled her window down. "Get in," she said.

"Wild," he said, and he got in.

CHAPTER SEVEN
As Motley takes the right toward town, east toward the peaks of the Cascades, rain starts falling. There is nothing sudden about it. The gray cloud overhead, its source, has been more or less stationary for weeks. Despite the rain, Motley passes the turnoff to town and drives on to another, less popular trailhead, the cramped parking lot of the Diamondback Gulch. He parks, locks his door, and covers his dry clothes in a camouflaged, waterproof poncho.

A quarter of a mile in and there’s no sign of any weird mushroom activity. The forest is delightfully still and quiet and normal. Nevertheless, despite the apparent lack of orange coats and fungus, Motley follows his trail from ten feet or so off trail. At the slightest noise, he drops to the ground and covers his head with the camo poncho.

After half-an-hour of slinking through the earth-tones he hears a scream, a human scream: words, but he can’t make out what they are. Then a second voice and a third.

As stealthily as he can, Motley sneaks around the rocks and trees, following after the sounds of the voices.

"Yeah. I’m guessing this is him."

"P.A. is not going to like to hear about this."

"No, Reggie. I don’t think he is."

A troop of maybe a dozen of the orange raincoated men stand in a loose circle. At the hub of their wheel, disfigured, body opened up by a gaping bloodless wound, lays the boy. All around, black as char, lays the slimy remains of hundreds of humungous, rotten mushrooms.
Two hounds, tails low between their legs, sniff at the boy’s feet. They look back at the lead man in
orange for instruction.

Motley draws a small pair of binoculars from his fanny pack and through them sees the scene. One
raincoat holds his hands to his forehead. Another at a slight remove barfs in the mushroom debris. The
boy’s torso is hollow all the way through, and Motley can even see new mushrooms sprouting from the
earth below him.

The lead man in orange turns his back on the body and clicks the button on the walkie-talkie, "P.A.
It’s Mort."

"Yes, Mort. I’m here."

"Bad news, buddy. We’ve got a body. I think it’s the kid. It’s pretty nasty."

"Is Claire there?" P.A. whispers through the static. "Is she hurt?"

"No. She’s not here. But, P.A., man, the scene up here is really gross. We need to get some kind of
crime scene investigation started. I don’t even know where to start looking."

"It’s likely, Mort,” P.A. says, "that she is nearby."

Mort holsters his walkie-talkie.

"Okay," he says. "Somebody cover up this body. We’ll take him with us when it’s time to go back
down. Let’s do four teams, each one goes in a different direction. Don’t worry. Whatever did this is gonna
be long gone by now. Be sure to make a lot of noise though, just in case."
The other raincoats quickly form small teams as instructed and leave their leader, Mort, to package up the body. One of the groups moves on a line directly toward Motley, who has to make a decision: trust his camouflage poncho to hide him, which might allow him to sneak down to the body to take a closer look, or he can flee the scene, find another route back to the troll’s meadow.

Ultimately it’s the first option that excites him. Gruesome as he feels about it, he has to examine the wound. He has to know whether it’s the troll that did this. It just can’t be her, he thinks, curling in the fetal position under his camo-plastic.

His heart beats faster, his mouth runs dry. Their footsteps keep coming for what seems like a long time. Have they found him? Are they just circling him like sharks? What’s taking so long? He can almost smell one a few feet away, and his arm starts trembling from the effort of keeping still. It’s almost more difficult for him once they have clearly passed and the sound they make starts getting quieter and quieter. They’ve passed him by so he’s safe, but he knows better, and he waits. He waits until what feels like twenty minutes has passed since the sound of the last step decayed into silence. As he starts to move he hears a sneeze and drops back down again.

When he finally manages to stand and walk down to the clearing it’s only to find that the leader of the orange raincoats is gone and with him the boy. Motley—disappointed and relieved equally—photographs the clearing. Gun-shy, and feeling like he’s trespassing on land he knows perhaps better than anyone else, he dives behind a rock when a breeze blows broken branches down from the trees to the forest floor. He leans against the rock, breathing deeply. He’ll give it ten seconds before coming back out. Then what? He has no plan. All of these years, this has been his plan, just wander around, see what you see, think
about it, believe real hard. But what was the purpose? What good was that as a method? He was now, without a doubt, absolutely one hundred percent certain that the troll, whom he’d so long tended, was a murderer, and that he, the only person in the world who was in the least bit obligated to stop this very sort of thing from happening, had failed completely to live up to his responsibilities.

When his ten count ended, he stood and headed back towards his truck. Maybe he would try Gateskill’s camp again. He walked back toward the trailhead, but saw a figure, just a dark silhouette, up ahead. He hid, but it kept coming closer and closer. It was the boy, he realized, when he was standing right in front of him. It was the boy the leader had called Alvin. He knows because of the gaping donut hole in his torso.

The boy says, "Have you seen her?" He is smiling. He seems friendly. Other than the hole, he doesn't seem much stranger than anybody else.

"No," Motley says. "No, I haven't."

Alvin nods his head, clearly understanding something. "That's okay," he says. "We'll find her."

With both of his hands, Alvin offers a beautiful glowing white ball. "It's a gift," he says.

Motley takes it. "Thank you," he says and Alvin starts to walk away.

"Wait!"

Alvin stops and turns around.

"Do you mind?" Motley asks, holding up his camera.
Alvin smiles and nods. Motley gently sets the white orb on the ground and sets up his shot. "Would you lift the t-shirt, just a little bit?"

Motley creeps closer and snaps the picture, a close-up of the wound. A clean, round hole, without organs or blood. No claw marks or other sign of trauma.

"Thanks," Motley says.

"My pleasure. Don't forget," Alvin says, pointing at the puffy white orb on the ground.

* 

In the backyard, Vera has set lawn furniture under the mammoth mushrooms to keep the rain off. "We might as well put them to use," she says, sitting with Motley, drinking vinegar from special amethyst mugs.

"Okay, so what is this thing?" she says.

Motley hands her the white orb. "This is what the kid gave me."

"Another mushroom? Seriously?" She rolls it over and over in her hands.

"Is it? I guess I didn't realize."
"It’s a puffball," she says. "A nice looking one, for sure."

"I wonder why he gave it to me?"

"Maybe he thought you looked hungry."

"I don’t know," Motley says. "He asked if I’d seen her."

"The missing girl?"

"That’s what I thought at first, but he had a hole in his chest. What if he meant the troll, my her?"

Vera makes a repulsed face. "Sorry, vinegar. Yuck. What if?"

"I thought when I was driving back this way, what if I’m supposed to eat this thing, like I eat it and, boom, I know where she is, where they all are?"

"Oh, no no no no no. You’re on a mushroom fast until further notice, Motley. You can’t eat this. This is one thing," she says, gesturing to the makeshift umbrella over-head. "Ingestion is out."

"Relax. What I was saying is, when I had that thought, I had another thought. It was like a vision. The old Burlington Northern trail. I used to find so much activity out that way. And there’s all those caves. It just came to me. That’s where they are."

"You have to trust those intuitions, Motley. Those are the real gifts."

"Yeah?"

"Definitely," Vera says, nodding sagely.
"Then we should go?"

"Yeah."

Motley leads the way off the mown path beneath the power lines back into the trees, along a trail he knows by heart.

"Hey," Vera whisper-shouts to him from a hundred yards back in the darkness.

Motley kneels on the trail. "Sorry," he says. "We're almost there."

They walk together, in silence, holding hands, pausing at intervals so Motley can sniff the air and rub his thumb against the rough bark of trees.

"Here," he says, "this way," and he points into the full density of the trail-less part of the forest.

It's a common mistake to think you're on a trail just because the going is easy, just because you are unimpeded. In old forests like this one, the trail's role really isn't to hasten passage, though that's a byproduct. The trail is there instead to bear witness to where you've gone and where you're going to go.

As they walk, apparently off trail, Motley says, "I blazed this myself, like a million years ago. You believe that?"

"I believe the million years part," she says.

"If you have to use your flashlight," he says, "keep it pointed down. Try not to let anyone know we're here. They've all got guns, and I'm sure they're all on edge right now."
With the full moon lighting the canopy's gray aura of rain, they hear falling water though they can't see it. They step into a blue clearing with the full moon out in a break between clouds. The rock face of a ridge is stark black before them.

"Here we are," he says.

"Smells like shit," she says.

"That's how you know you're here."

At the edge of the meadow, between a few trees, a space of deep shadow catches his eye and he sweeps the yellow cone of light back and forth around it. "No," he says. "That's not it. Over here."

He runs up the rocks a little way, and shines the light into a crack in one of them. Through it he sees a few articles of clothing on the dirty ground. There's a t-shirt, a hair tie, a sock, but no troll and no girl.

"Hello," he whispers, "anyone in there?" But no, no one responds. As he peers through the narrow window into the cave he feels one of the rocks is loose. It seems to be an enormous, hundreds of pounds, boulder, but it comes free easily. It isn't a rock after all, just the outer shell of one, a door almost. With it removed, Motley squeezes through. He searches the clothes, but there's no way for him to tell how long they've been there. There's no heat in them.

Vera follows him in. "Wrong cave?" she asks.

"Guess so," Motley says. They both sit down on the dirt.
"Who do you think this stuff belongs to?" she asks, picking up the t-shirt.

"It's probably mine," Motley says, "from years ago."

"You used to stay in these caves?"

"Yeah, I was really into caves for awhile," he says. "You're above ground and below ground. It's raining and damp, but you're dry."

"Maybe they're in another cave."

"There are definitely other caves."

"Then let's find the next one," she says. "Wait, did you hear that?"

"What?" he asks. He shines his flashlight into the back of the cave. Rock wall. Tree roots.

"Maybe nothing," she says. Motley hoists her up and she climbs out. "What the hell!" she yells when she gets up to ground level. Motley scrambles up the rock wall after her. Rough hands grab him when he reaches the top.

"Stand back," Mort says, stepping forward toward Motley, throwing a blue bolt of lightning out of a black plastic box.

Before he's tazed into unconsciousness, Motley sees the boy, Alvin, and the dozen raincoats standing behind Mort, Vera KO'd at their feet.
Gradually, the leaves dry. They become brittle. They fall away and come to rest in the corners of the cave where Claire lays.

And she is in a cave. She knows its dampness. Senses its closeness.

The maple and the falcon are gone. She knows this. They are outside, beyond the stone of this dwelling.

She can move her hands now, now that the leaves are off them. She flexes her fingers, circles her wrists. The leaves let go of her forearms, then her elbows, then biceps and shoulders. She raises her arms and feels out the space of the cave.

The maple and the falcon brought her here. Delivered her here? Were they her enemies now?

She curls her toes and the leaves fall off her feet. With her fingers, she picks the leaves from her belly and chest. From her thighs. As her limbs gain practice she scrubs the leaves away more furiously. She tries to sit up, but her neck is stuck, attached somehow, to the earth beneath it.

The last leaves she removes are the ones covering her eyes. She crushes them and throws them to
either side of her body.

Her eyes confirm what she knew already. The cave is damp and dark and musty smelling.

"Hi Claire," a voice says. Because she can only see the ceiling above her, she can't see the speaker, but she knows the voice well enough.

"Alvin!" she says, "I'm so glad you're here! Can you help me up? I'm stuck." With her fingers she feels the thick tree root attaching her head to the ground. She tries pulling her head up but the pain is unbearable.

"Of course," Alvin says, but his voice sounds weird, as if wherever he's standing now has an incredible echo. "We're here to help," he says, and it sounds like there are three of him.

This is, of course, because there are three of him.

The first says, "I think we'd better get you out of here."

The second says, "the pain will subside soon enough."

The third says, "we've been really worried about you."

"I'm stuck to the ground," she says. The three Alvins squat down around her. The first examines her head. The second palpates her belly. The third lifts her feet.

"You have a hole in your chest," she says. "Chests, I mean." All three have perfectly round holes in their chests. She puts her hand through the second Alvin and rubs his back tenderly.

"Yes," the first Alvin says squatting back on his heels. "That was a big change. Something pulled us
out of us. The important thing is we're here to help you."

"Why are there three of you? How?"

"The better to help you with, my dear!" the third Alvin says.

"Can you feel this?" Alvin number one asks.

She feels pressure, then a tugging as he pulls at something on her temple.

"Oww, Alvin. Stop, that hurts." She lifts her fingers to her temple and feels a stiff knot there.

"What is it?" she asks. She follows the knot down her scalp to the back of her neck. The root, apparently, fans out around her head like a hand; she feels the fingers of it running down her spine, wrapping around her throat.

The first Alvin reaches behind her head. "Let me know if this hurts," he says.

The third Alvin says, "wait. This isn't wise. We don't know if we're supposed to unplug her. Maybe this is where she's supposed to be. No one told us what to do."

"Well, we can't leave her in here. We have to get her moving,"

"I agree with that," says Alvin number two.

The pale light in the cave increases.

"I'm starting to freak out a little," she says. "Can we maybe take a few?"

The first Alvin, the Alvin she likes best right now, sits on the ground, on the moss nest beside her.
He strokes her face and runs his fingers through her hair as best he can considering the wooden attachment.

"What the hell is wrong with us?" she asks.

After a few moments the first Alvin says, "Well, Claire. I think we're losing our minds."

"You can say that again," she says. They smile. Smiling is great comfort.

"We really do need to get you out of here," Alvin says.

"Okay. What do I need to do?"

Alvin three says, "Claire, if you're still in there, let me know! We can still stop this."

"What is with this guy?" Alvin one says.

Alvin two gets up and pushes three, "Come on, man. What are you trying to scare her for?"

"What's he talking about?"

"He's being an idiot," Alvin one says.

"What does he mean?"

"Nothing. I don't think we all got the same brain. Let's stand you up, okay?"

She wraps her arms around his neck. He grabs hold of the root.

"One. Two. Three," Alvin one and Claire countdown together, and he tugs her with all of his weight, and pulls her forward into a sitting position. Fireworks flash across her vision, time-lapse of the creation of the universe, a big bang of light, particles swirling, collisions and fire, geological occurrence, the
crust of the earth overgrown with green, the advent of cellular complexity, terrible lizards, apes, the trees outside her cave shaking in the wind. She falls forward, dizzy as if punched, but Alvin one catches her.

**P.A.'s Interlude**

On the afternoon she and Alvin arrived, P.A. and Claire drove to the cemetery. It was raining heavily so they sat for a minute in P.A.'s black Mercedes. The classical music station played piano etudes quietly, the music lost in the sound of water hitting the roof.

"I do have an umbrella in the trunk," P.A. said. "We could test the elements."

"It'll let up."

"Okay." He relaxed into the seat. He hadn't realized he'd been so tense. He did his breathing exercises and on his third short exhale, Claire looked over at him as if pulled from a dream.

"Have you been up here to see her much?" she asked.

They were parked at the top of the hill. Through the wet windows they saw the dark storm clouds moving east toward the Cascades. On the horizon, they saw a shroud of eerie, vibrant blue.

"As often as I can," he said.

"So, 'no,' then."
It felt like an ambush.

"We’re here now," he said. "And it looks like we might get a break in the rain."

"It’s fine, whatever," she said. "I don’t mean to shame you. You’re a busy man."

The d.j.’s voice replaced the etudes but at a volume too low to make out what he was saying.

"Do you really think," P.A. said, adjusting in his seat, sitting on his coat so that the coat tugged his shoulders down. He unbuckled his seatbelt. "Do you really think this trip is a good idea?"

"Daddy," she said, "I already told you."

"I respect that," he said. "I really do. But."

She stared out the window. A symphony started. A great big symphony played very quietly.

"You just got here," he said. "I would really cherish some time with you. And I’d like to get to know your friend."

"We have to go. I can’t explain it. I have to go. We can catch up when I come back."

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" he asked.

"No. Why would you say that?"

"Is the boy in some kind of trouble?"

"Why do you keep asking me about trouble?"

"I have a television, Claire. I read the news. Claire, I have interns whose whole job is just to watch
the news and report it back to me. I know about the protest. I know about your group, and I know about
the burning buildings. Sweetheart, I know you care about the planet—"

"It’s not my group. I wasn’t even there."

"Who is the boy?"

"His name is Alvin."

"Alvin what?"

"Bean," Claire said, wiping her nose.

"And how did you meet Alvin Bean?" P.A. said, his tone, his face, his posture, all of it pushing her
against the passenger door.

"I found him on the side of the fucking road, Dad!"

She jerked the door lever and swung the door wide-open, but her seatbelt caught her at the
shoulders and throat. She grunted against its latch—something so mundane suddenly so unworkable—
until the buckle finally released.

"Claire. Come on. I’m worried! It’s my right."

She stood, and slammed the door. She walked up the path away from him and he let her go. The
sound of the rain relaxed into the white noise of a quiet drizzle.
If the weather had been better, they would have walked, something P.A. and Claire had often done together in the years since his wife had passed, though, he thought, not for a long time now.

The previous summer he’d found himself more or less unoccupied, though. Claire was already in California, business was running itself, and he had a tremendous amount of free time. Something had aligned in the stars and he walked the blocks to the cemetery by himself. He went without colleague, without driver, with only a wine glass and a half-bottle of Chardonnay.

"Alice," he’d said on that sunny, golden summer evening. "It’s beautiful here. I wish you could have a glass of wine with me." He didn’t say much more than that. He mentioned his businesses, the land he was developing, the wind farm he’d installed in Kittitas County. But mostly he sat there, in the grass beside his wife’s grave and felt the sun on his skin, a slight breeze blowing. It was the last time he’d been alone. Even though he doesn’t believe in ghosts, when he thinks about that evening he likes to imagine he wasn’t alone. After the wine was gone, a twig fell from the magnolia he lay under, into his glass. Nothing broke, thankfully, but he took it as a message.

He kept the twig with his wallet for a while, as a memento, but lost it at some point, his mind on other things.

P.A. locked the car and armed its alarm even though he and Claire were the only two living people
around. He walked the marble stones to Alice's grave, where Claire stood, arms crossed in front of her, looking up into the trees.

"Hey, kiddo," he said.

She didn't respond, so he closed the distance between them.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you in the car," he said. "I'm just worried."

"Things are serious," she said.

"Oh?"

"With me and this boy, with me and Alvin."

"I didn't mean to insult you earlier. It's just that was the first I'd heard of him. I wanted some background."

"I picked him up on the street."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean—I was driving. He was walking. I said get in my car." She turned around to face him as the wind picked up, hustling the gray clouds across the sky. "I don't really know, daddy. Something came over me when I saw him."

"Love at first sight?" he asked, smiling a little at the notion, at the fact that they were even talking.

"No. Something much, much—just way worse."
The drizzle picked back up, and the wind blew harder. Little twigs fell from all the trees.

When his wife got sick, P.A. immediately divested his portfolio of all polluting industries. He’d owned coal, shale, tar sands, nuclear reactors, etc. Her doctors were uncertain of the cause of her illness, but he knew—judged by the quality of the guilt he felt when he thought about it—that he had made easy money on dirty work, and now Alice was paying his price.

As she went through her first round of surgery, as he paced the waiting room, Claire glaring at him, he switched his business, his life. He bought controlling and silent interests in a dozen wind energy firms throughout the midwest. He invested heavily in solar research and development and covered all of his houses in solar panels. He donated money to Washington State, the City of Seattle, both Dakotas, Saskatchewan, Arizona, areas he’d defiled. He bought battery companies, and built infrastructure, all from the waiting room. He changed. Like a butterfly, he emerged changed, even as Alice did, and Claire.

Alice’s first operation was considered a success. The surgeons were able to remove the tumor pinching her brain. Beyond that, they could guarantee nothing. They held her under observation a week before they agreed to release her. In that time P.A. built an addition on their primary home—the permits rushed through the city. It was to be a health ward, a palace of recuperation, a collection of well-lit rooms, stocked with medical machines and comfortable windows in which to sit.

After her surgery, Alice spoke very little, but lay under her quilts, watching the birds in her garden.
Sometimes Claire sat with her. Sometimes they all sat together.

After months of what they believed to be progress—she was standing, laughing at the television, eating daily—things changed again. Claire found her mother catatonic and with a fleck of blood dried on her chin.

The doctor hung up his stethoscope.

There were tests, of course, but she'd fallen into a coma, and there was no telling how long it would last.

P.A. thought of himself as a man of great industry and pragmatism, and at the news he turned his Blackberry over to his chief lieutenant, Mort, with instructions that he be interrupted only under the greatest of threats to their bottom line.

From the landline in the kitchen of the new health wing, P.A. phoned gurus and faith healers and witch doctors and witches—a whole coven even occupied their carriage house from the vernal equinox to the solstice of that year. Sound healers bathed Alice with amplifiers set to 528 Hz. Color therapists ordered that her room be redecorated and that her clothing be made to match the bedspread and the bedspread be made to match the walls, and the harmony of the whole corresponded, they said, to certain occult systems P.A. struggled to comprehend.

"Where is she, daddy?" Claire asked.

"What do you mean, Sugar?"

"Where is Mommy?" The room, the shades, the pajamas they kept her in, all of it, was the same
lively shade of melon. Even the lamp-shade and bulb.

"She's right here, Sugar," he said. In his gray sweats, he stood out against the backdrop. Claire was able to follow his arm down to his fingertips to see her mother's face there.

"Oh, now I see her," Claire said. "Do you think she's dreaming?"

"I think so," P.A. said.

"Do you think she's dreaming about me?"

"Definitely," he said. He kissed her forehead and half an hour later, after Claire'd had a chance to read to her mother and tell her her stories, P.A. hired an astral traveler from the yellow pages.

His name was Scott MacClanaghan, and he seemed to have a good reputation. He arrived in a trench coat under which he wore only a loin-cloth and a Christmas wreath of beaded necklaces. Kneeling next to Alice's bed, he built a small altar of relics from his coat pockets: a goddess statue, some salt, a few small crystals, a tiny metal cauldron in which he burned sage and lilac and lavender.

"The energy's good in here," he said, looking around the health room. He swayed as he stood, slowly starting to dance. "The color's right. I feel good about this, Mr. Gateskill. I feel your wife is near." His arms swung out as he turned his body back and forth. His eyes closed and he bobbed his head as if to some music.

"What are you going to do?" P.A. asked him.

"It's all about hitting the dream frequency, Boss. I do that, my soul's going to pay her soul a visit. If
I can help her, I will."

"O.K.," P.A. said, and the man fell to his knees, his body pulsing with mystic vibrations.

"Godspeed then."

MacClanaghan knelt in the health room in the same position through the night, while Alice slept and P.A. checked his email in the adjacent room. Occasionally P.A. heard a gasp, or a stray phrase from the dream healer, but mostly he sat quietly with the hum of his laptop. His new businesses were dominant in their markets, and, while he grossed less total revenue and netted fewer profits, nothing threatened his personal comfort. He was wealthy enough to supply dream healers and crystal aura medics for the duration of Alice’s natural life. Claire would never want for anything.

As he watched MacClanaghan kneeling in trance, he wondered how much of all this was just a show. How much of the show was he producing week after week?

In total, the production went on for three years. Eventually, one morning he went in to check on Alice and she was gone. No breath, her eyes finally open again. But on that night, with the dream healer, just a year into the era, after P.A. finished interpreting the visualizations of his wealth and vast green empire, MacClanaghan fell out of his trance, and gasped on the carpet next to Alice’s bed. P.A. ran to his side, and kneeled next to him.

"I’m sorry," MacClanaghan said, still gasping. "I’m sorry. I tried to get to her, man, but she was out to sea. It took me half the night to even find a boat. I’m sorry." After he caught his breath and regained some of his strength, he gathered up his relics and put his coat back on. "I followed her as long as I could," he said. "But she had such a head start. If I didn’t turn around when I did, I never would have made it back
P.A. thanked him and paid him and showed him the way out.

The very last time P.A. and Claire and Alice had been together—the day, in fact, when Alice had first been struck down—was Claire's eighth birthday. They had chartered a boat and gone whale watching in the Pacific. After MacClanaghan left, and before the sun came up, P.A. held Alice's hand, remembering her at the bow, holding the railing, hair blowing in the wind, and Claire giddy, asking "Is that one over there! Is that one over there!" and all the water before them they hadn't yet plowed lay soft and glittering to the horizon like a long, beautiful gown.
CHAPTER NINE

Motley Young watches through his jail-cell window as a raggy, yellow cat yowls its head off. The pink of the cat's wide-open mouth pins down the world of brown mud, blue fog, and green trees all around it.

Motley lays on the top bunk, which gives him the privilege of the view. He feels like he's been dropped from the top of a tree. He aches all over, and the bunk has no sheets, no blanket, and no pillow.

Officer Prick Yoder shuffles into the frame of the window. He shakes a cardboard box of kibble at the yellow cat. It pounces on one of his boots and hops up to rub its ribs against Prick's shin. "Good kitty-cat," he says. He pours a pile of kibble on the asphalt and pets the cat as it eats.

Finally some quiet, Motley thinks.
The jail is small. Motley’s is the only cell. For real crimes and more dangerous criminals, it is rarely used, not even as a holding cell. In practice, it’s a rustic getaway, albeit an ascetic one, for some of the local mountain types. Things getting rough back home? Take a load off down at the jail. Prick’ll take good care of you.

Because the place is so often empty, Prick keeps animals for company. He keeps exotic fish in a tank behind his desk. He keeps an African gray parrot, and the cats in the alley of course. He has terrariums with turtles and lizards and snakes, and as Motley lays in his uncomfortable bed, he hears them all moving around in their squeaking cages. He hears the hum of the filter on the fish tank, the pause of the parrot about to speak.

Prick leaves the cat with a pile of food and walks around to the front of the jail. His boots echo in the long corridor as he approaches his desk.

"Good morning, Motley," he says. "Sleep well?" He hoists his utility belt over his paunch. It slides right back down from the weight of his gun and the heavy ring of keys. "Heard you were causing some trouble."

"Where’s my wife, Prick?" Motley asks, staring at the ceiling.

"She went for juice. You want some? The fridge is just down the hall by the W.C."

Motley rolls over to see Prick still pointing toward the snack room. The door to his cell is open, he notices. "What’s going on? Are we under arrest?"

Vera walks back with two styrofoam cups of orange juice. "Thanks, Prick," she says. When she
walks back into the cell, Prick locks the door. "It's Tang," Vera says, and raises a cup up to Motley's bunk.

"Thanks," he says. "Prick, what are we doing here? Are we under arrest or not?"

"It's simple," Prick says. "You two nearly got yourselves killed last night. Mr. Gateskill asked that I look after you for awhile to make sure you don't need any medical attention."

"Well, I feel fine. Why did you lock the door?"

"I'll give you the same deal I gave Vera. I can open the door, but you can't leave until I say. Is that a deal?"

"What are we waiting for? Is there a charge?"

"Relax, Motley, there's no charge. You just can't leave."

"That's against the law."

"Well, sue me, that's the law today."

Vera whispers to Motley, "Come on, it's Prick. He's just going to babble for awhile. Drink your juice."

"They tazed us, Prick," Motley says. "And they're just shooting themselves in the damn foot. That kid is dead. I don't know about the girl, but I can't do anything about it playing patty-cake with you."

"I'm on your side, believe me. Are you hungry? I can make you some breakfast while we wait."

"Prick," Motley says, but Vera touches his leg.

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"Give him a minute," she says.

"Prick, I don’t want any breakfast. I’ve got a job to do, damn it."

Prick drops bread into an old, matte black toaster, and waits for it to pop up. He whistles while he waits, ignoring Motley’s stare.

"Prick? Prick?"

The toast pops up, and Prick slathers it with Jif, plates it on a tin tray and slides it through the cage. "Bon Appetite," he says.

"Prick, I’ve got a troll to take care of. She could be sick up there, or dying. Prick, there could be something even crazier going on up on that mountain. You can’t keep me here," Motley says, tearing into the toast.

"I think you need to just grow up and relax, Motley. I’m not letting you out right now. What would you even do if I let you out? Think about that."
The boy had been a wiggly fish since they'd brought his body back to camp the night before. Despite his apparent wounds—the window through his chest—he could run just fine, and had proved it, or so Mort told P.A. when the team finally made it back, as they crossed the south fork of the Skykomish. Mort and the rest of his exhausted team had had to chase after him through the water and damp, the cold of which didn't seem to bother the boy but threatened hypothermia for the team. Mort ordered everybody back to camp.

"Forget about him," he'd said, but half a mile later they crossed paths with the boy again. This time he stood frozen on a little stand of rocks, staring up into the canopy of the trees and the sky.

Reggie, one of the raincoats, with a finger to his lips snuck up on the boy, and, running like a championship footballer, tackled him to the rocks with a smash. The boy seemed chastened and apologetic, but Reggie carried his surprisingly light frame back to camp in a bear hug.
He passed out in Reggie's arms and remained unconscious when they laid him down on one of the
mattresses in P.A.'s R.V.

"We've got to phone out for medics," Mort said. He and P.A. sat together in the kitchen of the
R.V., both sleep-deprived and ugly in the full spectrum bulbs.

"We'll send him down in the morning," P.A. said. "When he wakes up, we can ask him where
Claire is. Til then, he can sleep here."

"He doesn't have any organs, P.A. It's a wonder he's alive. He's probably not even. Just stress, or
nerves firing."

"Like a chicken."

"Yeah, like a chicken."

P.A. ordered a double patrol to work through the night in the area around where they'd found the
boy's body.

"We've already swept that area," Mort told him.

"Do you have any better ideas?"

Mort shook his head.

"Look for where she might have run to."
"You got it, boss," Mort said.

P.A. fell asleep—just for a second—staring at Claire’s picture. He breathed deeply according to his exercises, and tried focusing himself into a beacon, something she could steer towards, a little light on a hill she could follow. He focused on that as hard as he could, but after awhile, when the generator kicked back on and the lights in the R.V. flickered, his focus flipped. He called out to her in his inner voice, "where are you," imagining stock footage of green and jagged mountain peaks as seen from a helicopter zooming by. He imagined his spirit expanding to cover over those images like a net, and he breathed into that feeling, and breathed into it, and didn’t realize he’d fallen asleep until he heard Alvin smash out the bathroom window.

Now, in a clearing, with the dawn brightening the trees, P.A. and the few sleepy raincoats he was able to muster on such short notice so late at night, encircle their quarry. The boy’d been a fox, and it’d taken them forty five minutes of fast looking, fast running, at one hundred and ten percent capacity to even catch sight of him.

One of the raincoats leaps toward the boy, but he side steps him. Another raincoat heads him off, but slips in the super-saturated turf. Alvin bounces past two more of the raincoats and leaps onto a tree, gripping it with his fingers and toes like a squirrel, but P.A. grabs him by the ankle with both hands and rips him roughly to the ground.
By the time he drags the Alvin back to camp, Mort and his team have returned empty handed and sit around drinking percolator coffee waiting for direction.

"Meet me up at the Winnebago in five," P.A. tells Mort.

"Did he get loose?" Mort asks.

But P.A. doesn’t say anything, just drags Alvin into the R.V. and slams the door.

P.A. sits on the table. Mort takes the chair. Alvin lays under a blanket on the R.V. bed.

"So what happened out there?" P.A. asks. Alvin curls into a fetal ball so all of his body, except his head, is under the blanket.

"It’s hard to say."

"You were hurt? You’ve been cut up pretty badly."

"I don’t really know. I was picking flowers in a meadow. Or was I eating mushrooms? Something grabbed us."

"You and Claire?"

"Claire wasn’t there," he says. "She’d gone on, man. She was already called by that point."

"You said 'we'."
"Me and the rest of me. It grabbed us. Like a wind with claws. It carried us up the mountain to a rock where it cut us open and pulled us from our body."

"You know," P.A. says, "I don't really care. Where is Claire?"

"Another one of me might know," Alvin says. "I'm pretty limited, all things considered."

A voice from where Alvin's abdomen would be under the blanket says, "I remember."

Alvin pulls back the blanket to reveal an exact copy of himself. This new Alvin sits up on the cot.

"The creature pulled us out of us. It pushed her into her." He opens his palms as if to say, there, you see? Simple.

P.A. looks to Mort who can only shrug at this pseudo-information.

"So, ah, two questions," P.A. says. "One, where is Claire?"

"Everywhere," the new Alvin says.

"At least," the earlier Alvin says, "she will be."

A knocking comes at the R.V.'s door. "Mr. Gateskill. Mr. Mortimer. We could use some help out here."

"Mort," P.A. says and nods at the door. "I think I might be going crazy."

"That's going around," Mort says, yawning. "What is it," he says, letting the daylight in.

The raincoat says, "It's the boy, the boy, Alvin? There's more than one, Mort."
Mort looks back over his shoulder, at P.A. who's just as confused. The two Alvins smile contentedly on the bed, like nothing could be more normal.

"How'd you know that?"

The raincoat points out to the trailhead. Easily a dozen of the Alvins mill about among P.A.'s orange coated associates.

"Okay," Mort says. "See if you can get any info on where Claire is. I'll be right out."

"Where is Claire's body," P.A. says to the Alvins. "Let's try that. Her corporeal form. You're talking about a spiritual thing, yeah?"

"It's everywhere," the second Alvin says.

"I think he means her human body," the first Alvin says.

"Yes," P.A. says, "that's right. Where's her human body."

"Not far," the first says, and the second agrees, "not far at all."

"How do I get there?"

"There's no trail," the second Alvin says. "A bird dragged her."

"Where?" P.A. asks again. Is this insanity, he wonders? Is this just sleeplessness?"

"Under the train-bridge," one of them says, but P.A. is losing track of which of them came first.

"By a waterfall," the other says.
"And?"

"In a cave."

"Actually," the other says, "I think we're moving."

"You said, 'we're.' Do you mean Claire?"

"Yes, Claire, and the rest of us."

"Well, the creature's helping."

"They're working together," the other corrects.

"Where?" P.A. demands.

"Under the train-bridge."

"By the waterfall."

CLAIRE'S INTERLUDE

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"It’s like the Girls Scouts," Claire said, adjusting her gear to balance the weight in her pack. The trip was going to be a three day hike in the Northern Cascades, a simple loop. Nothing too scary, though maybe they’d see a mountain goat. That’s what Vickie had told her anyway.

"I don’t remember you joining the Girl Scouts," P.A. said, standing in the doorway of her room, suitcase in had. He was waiting for Carl to pull the car around. He had a plane to catch.

"I’m sure I told you," she said, staring into the pack as if with purpose. His gaze tugged on her shoulders, begged for acknowledgement.

She said, "I know I told you about this, and it’s not the Girl Scouts. It’s 'like' the Girl Scouts. It’s the Ridge Rovers." She had to pause mid-way through the sentence. Ridge Rovers was originally just a goof, hilarious among the group of other 'Rovers, but totally embarrassing when it came to saying it aloud to someone else. So what if she hadn’t actually told her father she’d joined a group, and so what if that group was only sort of legit? She was getting out of Seattle for a few days, and besides, it wasn’t like she was going to a raging kegger. She was going hiking with adult supervision.

"How long will you be gone?" P.A. asked.

"I'll be home before you will."

"How long?"
Carl tooted the car's horn in the courtyard.

"Three days."

"Call me or text. Email. I'll have my Blackberry. Send word when you're safe."

"Ok," she said. She re-rolled her sleeping bag, trying to make it smaller, tighter, more compact.

He walked into her room to kiss her cheek. She flinched, though, so he stopped, one foot on the wood in the hallway, one in the stone of her bedroom.

"I love you, Claire," he said.

"Have a safe trip," she said, and he walked out, and got in his car, and flew away to Kuala Lumpur.

Besides Claire there were four Ridge Rovers and Vickie, their leader. Vickie was older than the rest of them. She was twenty-four, and filled with wisdom.

For weeks prior to the expedition the group had met at Vickie's apartment and talked politics. The question: how can a woman be in the world? Vickie quoted to them—from memory!—from Butler, Irigaray, Cixous, and listened genuinely, earnestly, eagerly to their replies.

Radical feminism and ecology were linked, she told them, but any attempt to define that link would only reify the distance of the link itself. "The bridge," she said. "The trail," she said. To talk about it would only dredge a moat of words between the concepts. "And there's the rub," she said, "there's no way
to talk without talking it."

The importance and the impossibility stirred something powerful in them.

"It’s bad enough," Vickie said, "that we have to say 'radical feminism' and 'ecology'. Why make it worse drawing chains?"

This was the reason for their journey to the Cascades, to Index, why they invented the Ridge Rovers in the first place, and why they were so quiet on the way up and on the first day's hike.

"Try to feel the energy of the geology, of the air, the control of the trail. Notice what you notice," Vickie said. "Pay attention to your heart and mind. We'll discuss your experiences around the fire tonight. Until then, let them grow unworded."

They walked the trail in a more or less single file line, breathing deeply, smelling the pitch and the needles, the dust and the rusty taste of the tiny waterfalls splashing through the ferns every few feet. They paused on the bridges, all smiling and silent. Margaret, overjoyed at the sight of a bald-eagle, grabbed Claire’s hand, pointed at the circling killer bird and mouthed, all breath and no sound, "Did you see that?" and bugged out her eyes for emphasis.

When they stopped for lunch they exchanged handfuls of trail-mix, communicating only with facial expressions and pantomime. A false swoon if a cookie were delicious. If not, two hands to the throat.

That night, after the fire was lit, Margaret was the first to say anything. "I just can’t even explain the things that were racing through my mind," she said. The orange of the fire made puppets on her face, even as the last of the natural light was still alive. "I am a part of all this, you know? But apart from it too."
"Yeah," Evelyn said, "And that's really true. At a molecular level I kept thinking, What makes us different? I'm sitting on a stump right now, but what's my butt and what's the stump, right?"

"This is great, let's see if we can tie it all back—" Angie said.

Claire tuned them out. Vickie, their leader, also seemed terribly withdrawn. She sat a little ways removed from the rest of the group, staring at the fire. As the conversation ranged over notions of gender, humanity, non-humanity, and systems thinking, and buzzwords, like performativity and rhizome, were used to bulwark the group's collective and singular experience, Vickie's face went from an expression of disinterest to one of outright hostility. Eventually, she lay down next to the fire, and Gloria, who sat closest to her, pet her hair.

Angie, awhile after sunset, did ask, "What do you think, Vickie?"

Vickie looked up from the fire, out from the cave of her sleeping bag. "I think you women are making great points. I'm trembling at your insight, I really am."

"You look like a mummy," Margaret said, laughing a little.

"Well, that's appropriate, I guess. I am thinking on the topic of death, and life after death. The planet's days are numbered," she said. "What good will our work be then? What psychic power will our deaths convey once we crash into the sun?"

"Grim," Evelyn said.

"It is grim. It's also a fact. One day, all this will be nothing, reduced to what it was before it was anything. What will that mean? I hear you talking about nature and intrusion. I hear you making valid
arguments. About the trail and the presentation of nature, the aestheticization of nature. The men who made the trail made a container. You're right, but I'm thinking there's nostalgia there and I wonder if you notice it. The trail invites even as it rejects. I get that—but aren't you comparing this trail to some unmade and impossible trail-less wilderness? Irigaray comes to mind," she said, and closed her eyes.

Ordinarily Vickie was animated and loving. She sat on the edge of the couch when the other girls spoke. In her apartment there was no sense of hierarchy. Out here, though, Claire felt like she was getting a sermon. From the looks on their faces, she could tell the other girls were just as confused.

Vickie said, "Irigaray says, 'I go on a quest through an indefinite number of bodies, through nature, through god, for the body that once served as place for me, where—open parentheses—male—slash—female—close parentheses—was able to stay contained, enveloped.' You're all wanting to go back to something, but there's no back back there. There's never been an all inside and there never will be until we crash into the sun."

"What good will that be?" Margaret asked, visibly dismayed.

"It's four billion years from now," Evelyn said, "what does it even matter?"

Vickie opened one of her eyes playing at being playful. "I know, I'm being heavy," she said. "I don't mean to destroy your hope and belief. I am really just thinking about death right now, and its power."

She quotes again, "power is not simply what we oppose, but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are.' That's J.B.," she said. "You know, we 'rage, rage against the dying of the light,' but it's that that constitutes us. Planetary
destruction is the only thing that gives birth on earth." Vickie's voice got softer, fuzzier, as she said these words. She was thinking out loud, but the lecture as a whole might as well have been an explosion.

"So," she went on, maybe feeling she had lost her audience. "How do we tie this back to radical feminism?"

When no one spoke, she said, "I'm trying to make a model in my mind. The mummies, who mentioned mummies? Someone said mummies. All our lives we tend toward death, always living in the shadow of those who have already died. It feels so cyclic," she said, "but I just don't have it in me to trust such simple geometry. I mean, a circle? What the hell is that?"

No one answered. The fire cracked and popped and slowly dissolved. Eventually, Gloria added a few more logs. The evergreens groaned together overhead and the wind made a living, resonant sound.

Because the weather was so accommodating, no one had bothered to pitch a tent.

The next morning the energy was still low and the conversation started off stiff. The 'Rovers rolled up their gear, talking in pairs about how beautiful the morning was. They chatted while hiking and by mid-day the esprit d'corps was more or less restored, only without the critical theory lectures. They called out the names of birds in the trees and sky, critiqued films they'd seen and gossiped about people they knew in common. Around 5 p.m. they reached their destination: one of the lower, more approachable summits of Mt. Index. From that point they had a panoramic perspective of the range. They said, "Wow, oh wow. It's so beautiful." Regardless of how aestheticized the view was, all were stunned by it, even Vickie. Margaret drew them together and took a photo. In it they all wear big goofy grins.
Even as the picture was taken, in the wind and the sunlight, Claire’s thoughts returned to the night before. This is where I’ll be, she thought. When the earth crashes into the sun, this is where I’ll be.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Vera reads Motley his tarot, tells him P.A. Gateskill is not his enemy, but an ally.

"You should listen to her," Prick says at that.

Motley takes the puffball out of his fanny pack and looks at it in the little light of the cell window.

"Do you think," he asks Vera, "that it could be like a crystal ball? If I look into it long enough, it could show me what I want to see?"

"There’s all manner of foci, Motley. So, yes. That could work."

He stares into the mushroom. "When will Prick the Prick let us go?"

"Soon enough," Prick says. "Relax."

Now the familiar back-firing of Motley’s pickup truck sounds in the parking lot. Through the jail-cell window, Motley sees P.A. Gateskill waiting, hands in the pockets of his orange coat, breath visible in the cold. He looks terrible, like he could pass out standing up. He sways on the gravel, struggling to keep his bloodshot eyes open. He walks around the side of the building.

The front door of the jail opens on squeaky hinges. The parrot flaps its clipped wings. "How ya' doin' daddy? How ya' doin’" it says.
"Officer Yoder," P.A. says.

"No, Mr. Gateskill, that's my parrot, Sammy. I'm joking, of course. How are you this morning?"

"Exhausted. Is your warden in?"

Prick gestures to the jail cell, and P.A. offers his hand through the bars. Vera and Motley look at it.

"I realize we haven't really been introduced. You're the troll warden?"

"Yes," Motley says, standing in front of the outstretched hand, his arms across his chest.

"I don't have to feel crazy in front of you then. We have a troll problem. I'm afraid for the safety of my daughter."

"No shit."

"You could have told me," P.A. says.

"Prick, are you gonna let us out now?"

"I hope you'll accept my apology," P.A. says, still offering his hand. "You wouldn't believe how strange the things I'm seeing are."

Motley and P.A. lock eyes for a moment, which makes Motley uncomfortable, the guy before him swaying, trying to keep awake. It's been almost three days since P.A. and company arrived, and he's sure P.A. hasn't slept in all that time. His hand hangs limp through the bars.

"The boys said something about a metal bridge."
"See," Motley says to Vera. "We were in the right place."

"It's a gift," she said. "Come on, Prick. You can let us out now." Prick hikes his belt up on his belly and lets them out of the cell.

"Best of luck," he says. "I'd go with you if I could, but, my place is here," he says, following them out, as if the jail were his home and they merely guests.

Motley drives his little truck back up to the same secret turn-off he and Vera had used the night before. P.A. leans on the passenger door, eyes closed in reverie. Vera sits in the middle, squeezed between them.

P.A. says, "Before she left, hours before she left, she told me she was serious about this kid. She was talking about forever. 'I want to be with him forever, Dad,' kind of talk.

Vera rests one hand on Motley's leg. She turns the volume down on the Grateful Dead tape.

P.A. says, "So I told her the truth: have fun. You're young. Maintain perspective. You can find something else to be serious about. Don't settle. She didn't take me very seriously," P.A. says, then sits up on the seat, blinking furiously. "It wasn't something she understood or could control, but something in her being. That was the last conversation we really had."

"Well," Motley says, parking. "Let's see if we can get you another conversation."
"You're on," sleepy-eyed P.A. says. The three of them climb out of the truck.

The sound of a rifle shakes the trees and wakes P.A. right up.

"What was that?"

"A gun," Motley says.

The three of them run into the forest along a trail most people wouldn't recognize.
CHAPTER TWELVE

Claire feels everything.

Vegetable, mineral. Solar, mushroom.

The space in a crack of rock. Its vibrations.

The shush of the waterfall—out and away from this circle of arguing Alvins—shapes space, breathes direction: thataway, over there, yonder; the earth's wet tongue.

Claire and the Alvins have left the cave now. She's stronger now, gaining strength now. Her head is still plugged into the cave floor, but when her walking pulls the root taut, she grabs it and jerks it, and spools of slack come coiling down the mountain.

She builds the trail they follow as they follow it, as they make their steps in the chaos of the forest as it has happened to grow they recognize the only natural path, the only way they could have ever gone.

Ferns grow from Claire's elbows, her shoulders and knees. Fiddleheads sprout on her knuckles, and unfurl from her nostrils.

The air smells of water, rot, and dirt. Oh yeah, she thinks, this is my smell now.
The third Alvin says, "I think it's important that we all recognize that this is forever."

But the others ignore him. The second Alvin says, "Water is the life giving element, I think we need to take her down to the river, and let it wash her away."

"That'll just wash her out to sea," the first Alvin says. "I say we take her to the peak, that way she floods all the rock, she permeates the range."

"Claire," the third Alvin says, "It's not too late. We can figure something out," but Claire won't even look at him.

Lichen grows on her skin. It tickles inside her throat.

She feels the air caress each drop of falling rain, feels it carry the wind, push the trees, blow back the long, white snarl of the mushrooms of her hair. She is in the air, and she is the air.

"She wishes to speak to me," she says, her voice raspy as a pan flute. "She's speaking."

"Who, Claire," the third Alvin says, and the second punches his arm.

Claire sinks into the ground, up to the waist. Her legs, already grown vegetable, collapse into rich, red earth. Her torso, arms and head still function fine atop the pile. She nods at whatever she's hearing and blinks her good working eyes. She grabs ahold of the root and rips it out of the back of her head and throws it. It comes to rest on the ground like a dead snake.

A man, not far off, fires a rifle in the air, breaking Claire's concentration.
Through his rifle sight, Mort sees the creature the Alvins had told him about. Its face is vaguely
Clairelike, like Claire's if it had lain in the forest too long and rotted the way wood rots. Through the scope, he sees her looking back at him.

"What are you going to do, Mort?" one of the raincoats asks him.

"I don't really know yet, Reggie."

If it is Claire, even a vegetable Claire, he can't shoot her. But how in the world can he make that judgement?

Through the scope, he can see her, waist deep in the dirt, covered in mushrooms and ferns. A trio of Alvins pulls at her arms, attempting, Mort imagines, to pull her from the ground.

"What do we do, Mort?"

Mort lowers the gun. "I guess we wait. Maybe we should go down there?"

"Should we bring the Alvins?"

"Yeah. Bring a couple Alvins."

When they approach, Claire's three Alvins let go of her arms. "Get back, man," one of them says.

"Put the gun down, if you know what's good for you," another says.

"Claire, are you okay?" Mort asks, ignoring the boys.

"She's not okay," one of the Alvins says.

"What are you shooting at, Mort?" she asks, bored apparently, with the conversation already.
"I thought you were being attacked," he says. Her three Alvins, as well as the two he brought along, look at him expectantly. "Alvin, one of them anyway. He—they—said there was a creature."

"There are lots of creatures," she says.

"Well, let's get you out of her and cleaned up, then."

He grabs her arms, but she slaps him.

"Don't touch me, Mort. The creatures are mine. You don't get it."

He might be outnumbered, he thinks, but they're still kids, and lacking wisdom, and anyway, you don't just leave someone in the forest to rot. You just don't do that. "Come on, Reggie," he says.

Together, Mort and Reggie grab ahold of Claire and try, without success, to pull her free of the earth. She struggles against them, but they are tenacious and strong.

"Let her go!" most of the Alvins yell, and one of them even jumps on Mort's back and batters his ears. It's quickly a dog pile with the dozen plus Alvins swarming Mort and Reggie like ants on candy, and it's this scene Motley and Vera and P.A. arrive to.

"What the hell is going on here?" P.A. yells.

Hearing his voice, Mort stops struggling. He lays on the ground, shoulder-to-shoulder with the Alvins. The pile of Claire, reclaimed even further by the dirt, has grown. Only one side of her human face and one arm remain intact. Mort clutches the other arm to his chest.

"What have you done!" P.A. says.
Mort sees the arm in his hands as if for the first time. "It came loose!" he shrieks, in shock and fear.

Like an old log, the arm crumbles into dust. Each of the fingers falls off onto Mort’s orange raincoat and quickly decomposes.

As the Alvins stand up and dust themselves off, one of them makes eye contact with Motley.

P.A. kneels in front of Claire and touches her.

"Hi, daddy," she says. "I’m glad to see you."

"Are you okay?" he asks.

The Alvin mouths, "Feed her the mushroom."

"I’m not in any pain," she says, "if that’s what you mean. I’m a little confused by all this, to be really honest."

Motley, reluctant to disrupt the moment, takes the puffball from his fanny pack. It scrapes against the camera a bit, and some of the soft flesh of it tears. This would make a great shot, he thinks. Too bad.

P.A. touches the prickly ferns on Claire’s hands. "Trust me, Claire. We searched and searched for you. I don’t know where we went wrong." He hugs the mound of her, and she hugs him back with her one good arm.

From behind P.A.’s back, Motley offers Claire the puffball. She takes it in her one good hand, breaks it in her fist, and smears it across the ground beside her.

"I have a pretty good idea," she says to P.A. "Energy just kind of shuffles around," she says. A
bright red tulip grows out of her eye, and hits P.A. in the cheek, like a kiss.

"We'll get you out of this," he says.

"No, daddy. There is no out. There is no in."

P.A. cries and they hold each other for the better part of an hour, till the wind picks up and the rain starts.

As she turns to mud and her features are taken over by moss, she laughs. "Come back and visit, daddy. I'll be here."

EPILOGUE

That spring, P.A. took a weekend without his attendants to go for a hike. Though he said he was a proficient hiker in his own right, Motley acted as guide. He showed P.A. the tulip bed where Claire had
been consumed. He showed P.A. the best vistas of the range.

"Do you ever see her?" P.A. asked. "I heard you used to keep track of her... predecessor."

"Sometimes I get a feeling," Motley said.

"What about the boy, Alvin?" P.A. asked.

"I still see some of them around. They don't seem all that coherent anymore. Winter was pretty rough on them, I think. Not many of them made it."

Staring out at the mountains across the valley, at all the undulating green, P.A. said, "I really miss her."

Motley didn't respond, but he understood.

The next morning they woke to a bird's nest full of eggs outside their tent. Six, foot long mushrooms grew around it.

"Somebody out there must like you," Motley said, and then fried it all together over his little stove.
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