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The Mushroom

by Brian Conn

In olden days there was a boy named Ood, who hated mushrooms. He thought that mushrooms were different from other foods, and he was right: the mushroom is one of the few foods that are neither plant nor animal in origin. Ood preferred to eat plants or animals, but if mushrooms were served he had to eat mushrooms like everybody else.

Ood was like a mushroom in that he was ugly and lived mainly in the dark. He attended the night school, which was a kind of school they had in his town for children who were ugly so that the normal children would not have to see them, and also so that the ugly children would not become discouraged. Because of the night school Ood slept at home all day. He had a mother, a father and some sisters, of whom all were plump and pale but none truly ugly. They led normal daytime lives and left Ood on his own at night.

Ood spent most of his after-school time with his best friend Ott, who was in his class at the night school and also hated mushrooms. Ood and Ott were alike in many ways. Both were thin and dirty, and both hated mushrooms. The main difference between them was that Ood had black hair that grew in tufts, whereas Ott had yellow hair that grew in wisps. The way they had become best friends was, Ood brought a thermos of cabbage soup to school for

lunch, and when he went to the bathroom Ott, who sat behind him, saw the thermos in his pack and took it. When Ood asked for it back Ott said, "Promise you'll be my best friend," and there was nothing else Ood could do if he wanted to have his lunch. So from then on they were best friends.

One night in early November Ood and Ott were in the tall oak in Ott's yard spying around with Ood's father's brass spyglass, which was one of the main things they did after school. Ood wasn't allowed to take the spyglass, but Ott said he should anyway, and if he didn't take it Ott became sullen and argued with him until he took it. It was very cold that night, but not cold enough that you couldn't step out for a minute or two and feel refreshed. The moon was high and bright, the trees were bare, and the air smelled faintly of November woodsmoke from the dying fires of the town. Ood and Ott had already looked at all the houses they could see from the oak, and found every one dark, and they were about to climb down the tree and go in Ott's house and have some cider. But just then Ood said, "Look, Ott, old Yampa is out," and pointed at old Yampa's house.

Old Yampa lived in a dark house behind dark trees on the next block from Ott. He didn't come out of the house much. Ood had only seen him once, Ott twice. The skin on old Yampa's face was loose like an old man's skin, but instead of wrinkled it was smooth and moist. It made him look like a baby might look if the baby were ninety years old. He had big pale cataracted eyes like oysters and white bags that swung beneath them.

From the tall oak Ood and Ott could see into old Yampa's back yard, where there was a closet-sized metal shed and a perfectly round grassy hill about twice as tall as a man. As Ood and Ott took turns watching him with the brass spyglass, old Yampa walked two times around

the hill, stopping now and then to look it up and down with his hands on his hips. He was wearing a light t-shirt and suspenders. After he finished walking around the hill, he unlocked the shed and went in.

Ood scarcely had time to say, "What do you think he's doing, Ott?" before old Yampa came out of the shed with a lumpy burlap sack slung over his shoulder. Three dark moths fluttered out of the shed behind him. In the moonlight old Yampa's skin looked even stranger than usual. It looked like melting plastic. It was as if he had had some kind of surgery, a skin-emplasticking surgery, but now the plastic was slowly melting. He looked the hill up and down once more, then walked behind it where Ood and Ott couldn't see him. He didn't come out from behind. All there was to watch was the three moths fluttering around.

They watched for a minute or two, then Ott said, "Come on, Ood, let's go in and have some apple cider. My mom got cinnamon sticks." So they did.

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The next night on the way to school Ood said, "Old Yampa is an old man, Ott. And he was only wearing a t-shirt and suspenders. Wasn't it too cold for him last night?"

But Ott said, "It isn't the same for grown-ups, Ood. They can take it more than we can. And probably old Yampa was in the army. They have to practice going in the cold all the time, so if they have to fight in the snow."

Ood thought Ott might be right about adults being able to take it more, but he didn't think old Yampa had been in the army. Old Yampa seemed more like he had stayed in his

house instead of going into the army.

At school the teacher said that mushrooms were in the kingdom Fungi, which was different from the kingdoms Animalia and Plantae. The teacher wore sweet-smelling peach perfume and was very sad. Some teachers who taught in the night school were ugly, but there were not enough ugly teachers to go around and so sad teachers taught there too because teaching the ugly children helped them feel sad. When they weren't teaching they ate things out of plastic containers and read sad poetry.

"Mushrooms are very fascinating, boys and girls," said the teacher. She held up a poster of a mushroom. "They grow in the dark. They can get very big." She spoke in a slow hypnotic lilt, as if she were trying to sing but extremely tired. She sounded like a music box that was running down.

Shelby raised her hand. "Teacher," she said, "we grow in the dark too, don't we?"

"That's a very fascinating comment, Shelby," the teacher said. "Yes, you do grow in the dark, but that doesn't mean you are the same as a mushroom. In point of fact you are all very different from mushrooms." She smiled around. Shelby picked her nose with a dainty pinkie. Shelby had a nose where you could see far up her nostrils even if she was looking straight at you, and pale skin where you could see blue veins crisscrossing underneath. Ood was glad he was not a mushroom, but he didn't like that Shelby was not a mushroom with him.

"Shelby is a mushroom," Ood said out loud. The class laughed, but the teacher made Ood go to the principal's office for calling Shelby a mushroom.

#

After school Ood and Ott bundled up and went out to fish on the lake in Ott's dad's rowboat. It was a quiet night on the lake. They had never had a bite there, which Ood thought was maybe because the fish went to sleep, but Ott told him fish never sleep. They went fishing on the lake anyway because it was something to do. The lake was not quite big enough to be dangerous and was surrounded by weeping willows on the shore. The willows looked dark and secretive in the moonlight. The boys sat there in Ott's dad's boat waiting for some fish. Ood dipped his finger in the frigid water, and when he took it out it was covered in a slimy green moss. Ood wiped it on his pants.

"We're not that much like mushrooms, Ott," he said.

"Shelby is a little runty pig," said Ott, and snorted like a pig. "Runty Shelby pig," he said. He kept snorting.

"Stop it, Ott. But why do we grow in the dark, and so do mushrooms?"

Just then there was a tug on Ood's line and his rod shivered. For a moment he didn't understand what was happening, but then Ott said, "Ood, you have a fish," and Ood reeled in the fish.

Ood and Ott looked at the fish. It was a smooth black fish. It had no eyes. It hung there at the end of Ood's line, still and quiet like a clump of black lake-moss.

"It's bad," said Ott. "Throw it back."

"Why is it bad?" said Ood. He thought it was bad too, but he couldn't say why.

"Look, it's all black," said Ott, "It's probably poison."

The fish kept still as Ood took it off his line. It was as cold as the water it came from. Ood tossed it back and it vanished silently into the black lake. "It grows in the dark too," he

said, and sat back down.

Now both Ood and Ott started to have doubts about fishing in the lake. They had never caught any fish before, and now that they had caught one poisonous fish they couldn't help wondering, what if all the fish were that way? They had liked to drift around in the moonlight, always with the pleasant prospect that they might catch a fish. But now that they knew the fish they might catch, it wasn't as fun. It felt as if they were drifting around in the moonlight for no reason at all.

They kept drifting, watching the tiny ripples spread when they moved their lines, listening to the lapping of water against the boat. Ott tried to whistle a tune, but stopped. They both knew they would never catch a good fish in the lake. Ood jammed his finger in his shoe to scratch an itch on the bottom of his foot. The moon moved across the sky. Its light made the willows on the shore silvery green on the outside but black on the inside. Ood watched the willows.

"Ott," Ood said suddenly, "I think there's someone watching us there on the shore." Ott looked and saw the person too. It was a small white person. It stood there watching them. Ood and Ott were quiet. They breathed as quietly as they could. Their lines drifted along with them, forgotten. Under the boat, deep down in the lake, eyeless black fish slunk through the mud. After a while the person on the shore turned and ran down the road away from the lake. It ran like a pig.

Ott snorted softly. His line trailed along in the water.

Ood stared down the road where the person had run and slowly reeled in his line. After he had reeled it all in he sat there and stared at the road some more. Then he said, "Ott, let's

go spy on old Yampa again.”

#

They went to spy on old Yampa. They went up in the oak first, to make sure old Yampa wasn't out. Then they came down and crept through the shadows, then through the dark trees, then through some prickly bushes, until they were right next to old Yampa's back yard. They peered out at it from inside the prickly bushes. The round hill and the shed faced each other, frosted silver in the moonlight. Nothing moved. A single black moth fluttered from the shed to the hill, then nothing moved again.

“Come on, Ott,” Ood said, “let's go look.” He pushed out of the bushes and into old Yampa's back yard. Ott poked his head a little from the bushes, but stayed in there. He started to think it might be better to go inside and have some cider.

Ood went up to the shed. It was a boxy metal shed, about six feet cube, with a wavy metal roof that sloped back. Dark patches of rust had started to eat away the corners of the roof, but they had a ways to go. The grass came right up to the side. The shed smelled like rusty metal. A fat padlock hung on the door. Ood pulled on the padlock a little, but it didn't budge.

The hill started about eight feet from the shed. It was a very round hill, too high for Ood to see the top and too steep to climb without trouble. It looked more like a mound or heap or other made thing than a natural hill. Tattered blades of dark grass hung limp and lifeless from its side. Ood put his hand on the grass and it squished down. It felt rotten, and was damp

even though the night was dry.

All at once Ood was filled with revulsion at that rotten hanging grass. He kicked the side of the hill. His foot sank in ankle-deep. Warm, muddy mud gopped into his shoe. He yanked his foot out with a wet funt. Some mud slid silently down, carrying the grass with it. Ood wiggled his toes in his mud-filled shoe.

Ott, watching from the prickly bushes, started to have a queasy feeling. He felt scared of the muddy hill and the quiet shed and the bright moonlight. He felt a tickling on his left hand: a black moth had landed there. He jerked his hand to shake it off, but it didn't come off. It weighed heavier than a moth should weigh, about as heavy as a pinball. He jerked harder, but it still wouldn't come off. Another moth landed on his shoulder. Suddenly he didn't want to be in the prickly bushes anymore. In the prickly bushes there were moths everywhere. He tried to back up, but no matter how much he backed up he still found himself in the prickly bushes. He began to thrash and scratch himself on the thorns. More and more moths landed on him.

Ood didn't hear Ott thrashing in the prickly bushes. He was looking at the hill. Worms were crawling in the mud that had slid down, and more worms were wriggling in and out of the kicked hillside. Now that part of the hill had turned into wormy mud and slid down, Ood wanted to turn the rest of the hill into wormy mud too. He walked a step to his left and kicked the hill again. More mud slid down. He walked around the hill, kicking it everywhere he could. Then he started using his hands, plunging them through the grass and into the soft mud and clawing it down in gobs. Soon he was surrounded by mud and worms.

When he had got about halfway around the hill, he stopped. There was something in

the hill that wasn't mud. It was still partly covered in mud, so he couldn't see it right, but it was a little taller than he was and it was white. Ood felt it with his finger. It was mostly hard but a little bit soft, and slimy like the inside of your mouth is slimy. It felt like a wet mushroom. Ood poked his thumb into it: It was a wet mushroom. He wiped some mud off it. It was like an ordinary mushroom, stem and cap, white and spongy, but Ood had never seen a mushroom so big. He ran his finger along the dainty mushroom-gills on the bottom of the cap.

Just then Ott came crashing into old Yampa's yard. His face was covered in black moths and red scratches from the thorns. "Sshh!" said Ood, and crouched down. He was afraid old Yampa would come out. Then, as Ott shook moths off himself, Ood had a feeling like old Yampa was already there. He turned to look at the house, and sure enough there was old Yampa on the porch. Ott saw him too.

Old Yampa was naked. He was standing there on his porch watching them. His body was all white, like a carved block of white plastic, with no grooves or hollows or wrinkles. There was no hair around his privates, but instead there were mushroom-gills rippling in the night breeze.

Ood and Ott stood there a moment waiting for old Yampa to yell, but he didn't. They ran away.

#

They didn't talk about old Yampa any more that night, but the next night on the way to school, Ood said to Ott, "What do you think about old Yampa, Ott?"

“He’s a homo,” Ott said. “Once he invited my friend Eric over to his house and when he got there he started taking his pants off and Eric had to hide under the sink.”

Ood thought for a moment. Then he said, “But Ott, he seemed like a mushroom. White and spongy. And mushrooms grow in the dark, just like us. Does old Yampa grow in the dark too?” He slowed down and then stopped. Ott stopped too. Other ugly children walked around them on their way to school. “Ott,” said Ood, “let’s not go to school today. Let’s make a test to tell if people are mushrooms like old Yampa.”

“He’s a homo,” said Ott. “It’s when you hump a boy in the butt.”

Ood shook his head. “We can make a test to tell who’s a mushroom,” he said.

They went to Ood’s house to make a mushroom-brew. They mixed vinegar and cornstarch and some green rocks they found in Ood’s yard. Then some soy sauce. They looked around for mushrooms, but Ood’s mom didn’t have any. Ott went to see if his mom had any mushrooms while Ood stirred over the stove. He didn’t want to turn on the lights in case it woke his parents, so he stirred in the dark. The brew got dense and sticky, but he was afraid if he added water he would ruin it. He added more vinegar, then more soy sauce, then some lemon dish soap, which made it smell lemony and bubble up, then some scotch that had been in the cabinet since he was born. The rocks rattled around in there. For a long time Ott was away and Ood stirred by himself in the dark. Slowly the mixture fused over the fire into a mushroom-brew. Ood kept stirring and stirring and stirring.

By the time Ott came back with mushrooms, Ood was pretty sure he didn’t need them for the mushroom-brew. But they would give him a chance to make sure it worked. He took some of the brew in a spoon and poured it on a mushroom. Sure enough, the mushroom

turned black where the brew touched it, and smoke poured up, and there was a soft whistling in the kitchen like a far-off tea kettle. That was the sound mushrooms made when you found them out.

“It works, Ott,” Ood said.

“I think we should still put the mushrooms in,” said Ott.

“You can’t now.” Ood got out a thermos to pour the mushroom-brew in. “It would ruin it.”

#

They went to wait for Shelby to get out of school so they could find out if she was a mushroom. They hid behind a fence across the street from the school.

“Ood,” said Ott, “What will we do if Shelby is a mushroom?”

They laid a plan of how they would lock her in a cage and make her tell them who else was a mushroom and what was the big mushroom in old Yampa’s hill and what old Yampa had in his burlap sack that night.

“We can use my dad’s cage,” said Ott. “He was in the army and you have to put people in cages sometimes, if they’re a prisoner. I think it’s in the attic.”

Just then school started to let out. Ugly children thronged the street. Ood and Ott saw Shelby walk out of the school and start home. She was walking with the teacher. They were talking back and forth to each other.

“She’s with the teacher,” said Ood. They hadn’t counted on the teacher.

“Let’s follow them,” said Ott. They came out from behind the fence and joined the other ugly children on the street. They followed Shelby and the teacher towards Shelby’s house. They ran in short bursts, and between bursts they hid behind mailboxes or trees so the teacher wouldn’t turn around and see them. As they got farther from the school the other ugly children thinned out, until soon it was just them and Shelby and the teacher. Ood clutched the mushroom-brew.

“We’ll wait for the teacher to leave,” whispered Ott, “then put Shelby in my dad’s cage.”

But when they got close to Shelby’s house, Shelby and the teacher turned down a different street, a narrow, dark street with no mailboxes or trees to hide behind. Ood and Ott had to walk as quietly as they could and hope the teacher didn’t turn around. Soon they came out of the narrow street onto a different street. It was Ood’s street. Ood’s house was dark. His family was all asleep. All the other families on the street were asleep too. In the distance they heard a fire engine siren: a night fire.

“You live close to Shelby,” said Ott. Ood nodded. It was true. They watched Shelby and the teacher go up to Ood’s door. The teacher took out a key and opened it, and they went in.

“Why does the teacher have the key to your house?” said Ott loudly.

Ood didn’t know. He couldn’t think of a single reason why the teacher would have the key to his house. He looked over at Ott, but Ott looked a way that Ood had never seen him look before. Most of the time Ott looked pretty much like Ood. That was one reason they were best friends. But now Ott looked different, like what would happen if you took Ott and subtracted Ood in the same way as you take milk and subtract the fat. Ott looked like what

would happen if someone who didn't know Ood but knew everything else about Ott drew a perfect picture of Ott and then replaced Ott with it.

Suddenly Ott grabbed the thermos of mushroom-brew out of Ood's hand. He gave it a quick shake and opened it up and splashed some on Ood. Drops hit his face and chest and hand. Where the drops hit him they turned black, and wisps of smoke came up. There came a whistling like a far-off kettle. Ood looked down at himself in horror. Ott looked at him in horror. Just then Shelby and the teacher came back out of Ood's house and saw them there. Shelby was holding something in one hand. She pointed at Ood.

Ood started to run. He ran on black and silver moonlit streets, past dark houses and looming trees and lonely barking dogs, through weedy yards, over splintery fences, until he didn't even think he was in his town anymore. He closed his eyes and abandoned himself to running.

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When he couldn't run any more he fell down and tried to catch his breath. He kept his eyes closed. He smelled a swampy smell, and under his panting he heard the lapping of water. The ground felt damp and grassy. He opened his eyes. He was on the shore of the lake, behind some cat-tails. He had run almost in a circle. A big willow rose up beside him in the dark. When he had caught his breath he sat up and leaned against it.

His hand itched where the mushroom-brew had splashed it. He started to scratch it with his other hand, but he felt something there and looked down. Small mushrooms were

growing out of his hand like warts. There were hundreds of them, silver-gray in the moonlight. As he watched, the skin at the edge of the mushroom patch cracked and opened, and new mushrooms came up, hard and dirty. They covered the back of his hand and ran, itching, up his arm. He felt the itching creep past his elbow. Suddenly he felt a prick on his chest, then another on his face. He flexed his hand and a fine gray dust of spores drifted up from disturbed mushrooms.

He touched a mushroom with his finger. With some pressure it broke off, leaving a small empty pockmark behind. He scratched off more mushrooms and left more pockmarks. He scratched his whole hand, up his arm, his face, his scalp, everywhere on his body. Mushrooms scaled off into his clothes. In a frenzy he squirmed out of his clothes so that he was naked and he could scratch and tear freely at the tiny mushrooms. They left behind ragged pockmarked skin. Even after they were all off he kept rubbing himself all over.

He curled up in a ball in the grass and started to cry, rubbing feebly. Now his skin was rough and cratered like the surface of the moon. Now he was even uglier than the other ugly children: uglier than Ott, uglier than Shelby, the ugliest of them all. He would have to go to a special school by himself in the early morning hours, a school where the teacher would wear a blindfold and Ood would have a cage around him so that he couldn't touch the teacher, who even if it was the saddest teacher in the world would still be sickened by Ood and the idea of Ood touching her.

He heard someone come up in the grass behind him, swish swish. He sat up and turned around, still naked. It was Shelby with one hand behind her back. Ood grabbed the nearest clothing, which was his shirt, and put it over his privates so Shelby couldn't see them.

He sat there looking at Shelby.

“The teacher and I went in your house, Ood,” Shelby said. “We found this.” She held out his father’s spyglass. Ood reached for it, but Shelby pulled it back. “Does your father know what you were doing with this, Ood? I bet not. The teacher and I bet not. The teacher is very angry with you, Ood. We know what you were doing with this. She sent me to find you and tell you she was very angry. What did you want to find with this, anyway, Ood?”

Ood didn’t say anything. He smelled peach perfume over the reek of the lake mud.

“What did you want to find, Ood?” Shelby shrieked suddenly. “What?” She took a step towards Ood and hit him with the spyglass. Ood raised an arm to cover his head. Shelby hit him again. “What?” she shrieked. “What? What?” His bones shivered when she hit him. “What did you want, Ood?”

Ood kept a hand on the shirt over his privates, and with his other hand he picked up a rock. He lunged forward at Shelby with the rock in one hand and the other hand keeping the shirt over his privates. The rock hit her head with a thump. She dropped the spyglass and fell down on the grass.

It became quiet. Shelby lay still. Ood picked up his father’s spyglass and shook it. A broken rattle came from inside. He put it down. Shelby lay on the silver-green grass, her head haloed by dark blood. Ood didn’t have the mushroom-brew, but he leaned over and tried to poke his finger into Shelby’s face. It was supple, elastic flesh like his own. Cautiously, he touched the nose. It felt almost-bony, like an ordinary nose. He wiped Shelby’s face-oil off his finger with some grass. He stood there thinking.

Finally Ood picked up Shelby and waded out a little way into the lake. She had

stopped bleeding. He dumped Shelby in the lake. He tried to push her farther out, but she was heavy and didn't float. She just lay there at the bottom of the lake like a sack of meat. Ood went back up on shore and shook himself as dry as he could shake and put on his clothes. He picked up the spyglass and put it in his pocket. He felt his face. The mushroom scars felt rough, like old spaghetti dried to the bottom of the pot. He started walking to old Yampa's house.

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There was a commotion around old Yampa's house and the sky was orange. Old Yampa's house was on fire. There were two fire trucks and tall yellow-coated firemen holding hoses. People from the neighborhood were gathered around watching the fire. Orange shadows crackled across their staring faces. Sometimes they turned to each other and said things, but mostly they just stood there watching. Dirty smoke poured up from old Yampa's house like a million black moths. Ood walked up next to a big fireman with a goatee who wasn't doing anything. He pulled on his yellow fireman's coat. "Do you know where old Yampa is?" he said.

"Yampa?" said the fireman, startled. "You mean the old guy who lives here?" He shrugged. "We don't know, kid. He ain't inside. We don't know where he is. Maybe ran off. Maybe set the fire himself and ran off. Batty old guy, you know? We're just trying to put the fire out." The fireman was ten times bigger than Ood. "Hey kid," he said, stooping down to look at Ood in the hot orange light, "something wrong with your face?" He reached a hand out as if to touch Ood's face but stopped short and drew it back. "You ought to get that looked at,

kid. You ought to see a dermatologist or something. My aunt knows this great dermatologist. They can do things for you. Help you, you know?" He took a step away from Ood and went back to watching the fire. The other firemen stood there aiming their hoses. The fire slowly died down. Ood sat down on the curb and watched it.

The fire went out. The firemen drove away. The people from the neighborhood went back to bed. Ood was alone on the street.

He walked up to old Yampa's house. The dense trees and the prickly bushes were burned down. There was no sign of the round hill. Scraps of burned things lay on each other and dripped. There was an aluminum pot, a muddy quilt, a dirty white sneaker. Pieces of charred wall-skeleton stood or leaned. Ood stumbled through pools of water and scraped his shins on wreckage. He saw the wavy metal roof of old Yampa's shed poking up and went over to it. It was charred black. Under it Ood saw the smudged but unburned corner of a burlap sack.

The roof was heavy. Ood could budge it just enough to wiggle the sack out a little from underneath, then just a little more. He cut his palm on something under the roof, but when he looked there was no blood, only a rough furrow in his cratered skin. He grabbed the exposed corner of the sack and hauled with all his might. The sack ripped and Ood staggered back with a scrap of it in his hand.

The rest of the sack was still under the roof, but enough had ripped off so Ood could see what was in it. It looked like rich, dark earth. Ood put his hand in and rummaged around. Old Yampa's sack was full of earth. It was the kind of earth things grow in. Ood had the same feeling looking at the earth as he might have had looking at a basket of ripe tomatoes, fresh at

the morning market.

Ood left the sack of earth there and walked out of the dark tangle of wreckage where old Yampa's house had once stood. The houses on either side were untouched, but all that remained of Yampa's house was wreckage and a sack of earth. Ood walked down the street, past parked cars. He thought of trying to find Ott, but the thought of Ott made him feel a kind of constriction.

The sky in the east was a lighter black than the sky in the west. Ood bent down to look at his face in the window of a car.

His dark hair still grew in tufts, but below was a wasteland of craters and ridges. The thing it most looked like was an industrial flooring material, but it was uglier than that. It was so ugly no one could say anything about it, even that it was an ugly face: no one could call it a face at all. It was opaquely, inscrutably ugly: ugly like mud, ugly like thorns, ugly like a pair of blind eyes: so ugly Ood might as well do whatever he wanted.●