

The Anguish and the Fungi

by Jack CJ Stark

Calvin found it odd enough to have a mushroom speak to him, but the stupid little grin on its face caused the greater unease. It was nestled amongst the other mushrooms in the dark brown single use plastic container. The other mushrooms appeared normal; lifeless, silent, and, most importantly, faceless.

“What... did... did you just say something?” Calvin asked because talking back to a talking mushroom was the only sensible way to establish if the mushroom had indeed talked.

“I did, yeah,” the mushroom replied. “I said, ‘What’s ya name then?’”

“Oh, erm, Calvin.”

“Lovely to meet ya, Calvin. I’d shake ya hand but I don’t have none.”

“Don’t have any,” Calvin corrected.

“Yeah ya do. Ya got two of ‘em. I can see ‘em right there.”

“No, I mean, it was a double negative...” Calvin shook his head. “I’m sorry, are you talking to... I’m a little confused right now.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” the mushroom said in its characteristic chirpy tone. “Ya brows are all squished up and ya squinted beady eyes keep scanning around the room. Ya mouth is all agape so ya lookin’ pretty gormless from this angle. Bit empty headed!”

“Fucking hell, it’s happening again, Calvin. You’ve gone and lost your fucking mind.” He dropped the knife he was holding onto the chopping board and walked away from the kitchenette worktop and over to the seating area of his bedsit. He plonked himself onto his hole ridden futon. “You were doing so well.”

“Who are you talking to? Who else is here?” The mushroom called over. “I can’t see!”

Calvin ignored it.

“What do I do? What do I do?” Calvin pondered, twice, before picking up his phone. “Fucking hell. Maybe I should call an ambulance.”

“Why? Did ya cut yaself with that knife? Ya silly billy!”

“No, I should call Asha first. She won’t mind. It’s her job, afterall.”

“Who’s Asha? That ya bird? Relationships are more than just takin’, ya know?”

Calvin stood, pacing the room with the phone pressed tight to his ear. “Hi, yes, hello, Asha? It’s Calvin. Hi. Yeah, I’m so sorry to call you out of the blue like this, I know we’re not due to see each other until next Wednesday but I just... erm... well...” He spoke with speed, tripping over his words. “Have you got a minute to just chat about something? You can bill me the time, it’s fine.” A pause. “No, yeah, I’m fine, everything’s fine. Well, not really but I’m not in any immediate danger, I don’t think. ... It’s erm... oh, god, this sounds so fucking crazy! ... Right, yeah. Well, it’s the mushroom. It’s talking. ... Yeah, to me, directly. It’s got a face. ... Just, like a face. Rather cute, really. Bit chibi-ish, haha!”

“D’awww, ya gonna make me blush!” The mushroom called out. “Can I even blush? Emotionally I can.”

“Just then,” Calvin continued to Asha. “Did you hear it? ... No, of course not. ... Right, yeah, what should I do? Like, do I need to call an ambulance? ... Erm, I don’t know. Not really. ... The meds? Yeah, no, I forgot to take them today. ... Just today. ... Sorry. ... When we speak truthfully with each other. ... Three days, maybe a week. ... A week.” His tone dropped, his eyes turned to the floor. “Yeah, I will, sorry. ... I was just making some dinner, that’s all. ... Hmhm, yeah. ... Grounding techniques. ... It can’t hurt me. ... Call for help if I think I’m gonna hurt myself. I don’t think I will. ... Tomorrow at two? Yeah I can do that. ... Distractions? Well, I can’t put the TV on at the moment. Got no electric. ... No, yeah, I just need to get some on the card. ... Yeah, I could go for a walk, if you think that’d help. ... Yeah, I could get some leccy at the same time, ‘spose.” His demeanour had perked up somewhat and he seemed much calmer. “Yeah, thanks, Asha. ... I will. ... I have, yeah. ... Okay, thanks, again. And sorry, again. ... Yeah, see you tomorrow. Thanks, bye now. Thankssorrybyesorry!” He disconnected the call and threw the phone on the futon. It fell into a hole, lost forever and ever, or until he can be bothered to dig it again - whichever comes first.

“Oh, boy, you are awkward as fuck with the ladies, ain’t ya?!”

Calvin offered no response. He paced the room, chewing his bottom lip.

“Was that the first time ya spoke to her? Still, sounded like ya bagged a date, playa!”

Calvin reached into the pocket of a coat hanging on the back of the door. He took out a wallet, and checked for a card inside.

“Are ya goin’ out? Can I come?”

Calvin grabbed his worse for wear boots and started to put them on.

“C’mon, Cal! I ain’t never seen the outside. Well, I’ve caught glimpses of it here and there, but not properly. I sprouted in a windowless room, and was pretty happy there until they cut off my feet. Bastards. Anyway, that’s in the past. Let me come with ya! Pretty please.”

Calvin walked over to the kitchenette and reached into a cabinet, taking out two blister packs of tablets. He popped one from each and swallowed them down. He loomed over the pack of mushrooms but gave no eye contact.

The mushroom looked up, a stupid grin still on its face. “Where’re we goin’?”

Calvin shook his head, still without eye contact.

“Oi, rudie poo! Look at me when I’m talkin’ to ya. Is this what ya gonna be like tomorrow on ya date? Ya gotta look at folk, make them feel engaged with an’ all that jazz!”

Calvin glanced down, somewhat resistantly.

“Oh, hey there,” the mushroom said. His little adorable eyebrows bouncing up and down. “Are we goin’ out? Get some supplies for the big date?”

“It’s not a date,” Calvin finally replied.

“Then what is it?”

“An appointment.”

“A... vitamin D appointment?”

“What? No!” Calvin scrunched his face in disgust. “A counselling appointment. Therapy.”

“Oh, awks.” The mushroom did that thing people do when slightly embarrassed when they look around but keep scanning back to the other person’s face to check things are okay. “So, we goin’ for a walk? I’d love to see the great outdoors.”

“There’s nothing great about them,” Calvin said, being a downer.

“Don’t say that. Turn that frown upside down. The world is full of joy and wonder. You just have to look for it. Happiness is around every corner. C’mon! Let’s go for a walk, we’ll have a blast!” The mushroom said. “We can go to the park, walk around the lake, look at puppies, and I’m sure there’ll be some dogs there, too!” He paused for a laugh that didn’t come.

“*I’m* going for a walk, to get some leccy and then come back here. Me. Alone. And when I do get back hopefully you’ll be back to a normal, non-speaking, faceless, mushroom. Then I’m going to eat you.”

“Oh, come on! Don’t be like that. There’s good reason to take me with ya. You know why ya should be friends with a mushroom?”

“Nope.”

“Play ball, Cal. Why should you be friends with a mushroom?”

Calvin groaned and shook his head.

“Don’t make me say it!” The mushroom held back a chuckle. “I’m gonna say it! Get ready.”

Calvin rolled his eyes, fighting back a smile.

“I’m a real fun guy!” The mushroom blurted out. He paused, his smile beaming from gill to gill. After a moment of way too long awkward silence that did not include the roaring laughter the mushroom expected, he said, “You do geddit, right?”

“It doesn’t work, you’re an individual fungus.”

“And you’re a real buzzkill. A real tough crowd. I agree with ya girlfriend...”

“Therpist.”

“... that you could benefit from going outside, getting some fresh air in your lungs, some vitamin D in you. It’ll cheer you right up!”

“You were supposed to be my vitamin D.”

“Oh, kinky!”

“That doesn’t even make sense!” Calvin threw his arms in the air.

“C’mon, let’s go, let’s go, let’s go! Before we lose light.”

“Are we shooting a film?”

“I wanna see everything in the full light of the day. Oh boy, I’m so excited.”

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The park was relatively busy. The sun beaming down casting harsh squat shadows. Calvin found a bench set back in a quieter spot, surrounded by trees. He sat and observed, as was his way. He had propped the mushroom in his chest pocket with its face looking

out to the world. He was trying to be inconspicuous but people saw. They saw, they judged, they expressed perplexion.

The mushroom was spaced out, overdosed on external stimuli. “This is epic, man!”

“It’s just a park,” Calvin replied. A bright white earbud hung on full show from his right ear.

“There’s so much stuff! I’d heard tales, but this is... something else, man!”

“Can we stop with the ‘man’?”

“Ah, feminist! I’m with ya, sister! Down with the patriarchy!”

“What? No, shut up! And where do you hear tales from?” Calvin asked, shaking his head in disbelief.

“I hear things, man, I hear things!” The mushroom raised an eyebrow like The Rock used to in the 90s and 2000s. Back when pro wrestling was good.

“You don’t hear anything. I hear things, like a fucking talking mushroom! Oh god, I knew I shouldn’t have brought you out with me. I’m not supposed to engage with you. Ignore and distract. Stay grounded. That’s supposed to be the plan. That’s what...”

“Shut the front door!” The mushroom interrupted. “What the fuck is that?!”

“What?”

“That, there!”

“You have no hands, use your words.” Calvin looked around panicked, his breathing quick and short.

“On the ground, there! Mushroom shaped, popping up out of the soil. Big phallic thing! (teehee)”

“For fucks sake, it’s just a mushroom!”

“I’m sorry, what now?” The mushroom’s voice increasingly rose to a high pitched squeal that set off nearby car alarms.

“It’s just a mushroom. Chill out, dude. How is this so anxiety inducing for you?”

“It’s lost its buyer. It’s all on its own. Poor thing.” The mushroom would have teared up if it could, but alas, it had no tear ducts, for it was a mushroom.

“It doesn’t have a buyer. It’s wild,” Calvin clarified.

“I’m sorry, what now?”

“It’s a wild mushroom. Might be poisonous. Best to leave it alone.”

The mushroom (the one in Calvin’s pocket that had a face, not the wild one,) remained speechless. Its brow all squished up, its mouth agape. It looked gormless. Empty headed, some might say.

“I want to go home now,” the mushroom said, quietly and reserved.

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The bedsit door swung open. The light from the corridor casting beams across the dust particles suspended in the air.

“FUCKING. WILD. MUSHROOMS!” The mushroom was off on one.

Calvin sighed, a deep sigh of exasperation.

“You’re tellin’ me there’re wild mushrooms just out there in the wild?”

“Yes, everywhere.”

“What, like, ten of ‘em?”

“More than ten!”

“Twelve?”

“Millions. Billions, maybe! I don’t know. I’ve never bothered to count them.”

“Billions?! I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHAT A BILLION IS! I CAN’T PICTURE
A BILLION OF ANYTHING!”

“Will you please, please, for the love of all that is sacred, stop shouting?”

“Billions of mushrooms, he says,” the mushroom continued, in a quieter voice, but still louder than necessary. “Just out there. Living their best life. Flourishing in the sun. Living in nature. What did I do to miss out on this? What did I do wrong? Why have I been punished?”

“Miss out on what?” Calvin asked, placing the mushroom onto the chopping board.

“BEING A WILD. FUCKING. MUSHROOM!”

“Okay, okay, calm down.”

“CALM DOWN? CALM DOWN? No, sir, no! Calming down is not an appropriate response to learning that I had to be born into a windowless room, cramped and crowded by lifeless dullards all around, feeding on rotting wood, only getting a glimpse here and there of the outside world, to be tortured when they cut off my feet and

threw me into a plastic container amongst the corpses of my fellow kind to be sold as a commodity with little to no regard for my humanity!”

“You’re not a human.”

“No, I ain’t doin’ no calming down. I am outraged! I’m of a mind to angry up, if anything!”

“Can you do it quietly, please?” Calvin quipped as he headed over to the electric meter. He inserted the topped up card. The startup buzzing and beeping of thousands of appliances rang out. He flicked on the telly screen, hopped a few channels before settling on a ball sport.

“Oh, what a miserable existence I have had to endure. What a tragedy my life is!”

“Shall we go for a walk? It might help you feel better.”

“Oh, how you mock my pain, Cal! It’s alright for you! You don’t know what it’s like. You’ve never felt this sorrow, this all consuming gloom! How the world is dark, now. Joy nought but a distant memory in my bleak and worrisome mind. Hark, where has the light gone?”

“Don’t you think you’re being a little melodramatic?” Calvin asked, moving to stand over the mushroom. “It’s really not that bad.”

“How could you say that? Don’t try an’ erase my suffering! I am allowed to feel what I feel without shame. Without being victimised and mocked by those of you fortunate enough to never have felt this desolation.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry,” Calvin said, even though he wasn’t sorry in the slightest. “I don’t know what it’s like to be a mushroom discovering other mushrooms exist in the wild.”

“You’re mocking me again! Is this all I am worthy of? Am I just a plaything for your sadist ways?”

“Dude, chill, it’s not all sunshines and rainbows for the wild mushrooms, you know? Sometimes they get eaten by wildlife.”

“Oh, why don’t you cry so much for all the wild mushrooms that all your tears form a lake or a puddle or a stream or something similar? And then DROWN ME IN IT! FREE ME FROM THIS MISERY! I was born to be eaten. Where I’m from, my kind always get eaten. It is our destiny, cruelly set before we even have a chance to bloom. Denied our right to the luxury of being eaten by wildlife.”

Calvin sighed his dozenth sigh of the hour. “Speaking of eating; I am quite hungry now. It’s all that fresh air.” He turned on the camping stove and started to melt some butter in a frying pan. “What am I doing with you?”

“Do your duty! End me! Give me the mercy of a sharp, swift, swing of your sword!”

“Oh, kinky!” Calvin said, bouncing his eyebrows.

“NO! This is not the time and place. Do it. Chop me up and fry me in butter.”

“I don’t know,” Calvin hesitated, “I’ve grown quite fond of you.”

“And I you, sir!” Emotive music played in the background shifting the mood. “Meeting you has been the greatest honour of my otherwise cursed life. You are a beacon

of light to me. I learned a great deal thanks to you. Mostly things that gave me an overwhelming existential crisis, but let's not dwell on that. For now, my time has come to an end. The grim reaper approaches. Dice me and fry me; it would be my honour! I will face whatever awaits me with good grace and deference.”

Calvin groaned with discomfort. “I don't wanna!”

“CUT ME YOU COWARD!”

Calvin cut. Just a thin slice from the side, avoiding the mushroom's face. He wasn't a barbarian!

“Oh, Lordy!” The mushroom cried out. “OH WOWSERS! That really fuckin' smarts! Do it again!”

“Erm... you sure?”

“DON'T GET YELLOW BELLIED ON ME NOW! DO IT AGAIN!”

Calvin did it again. The mushroom cried out louder. He cut again, and again until the mushroom was laid out in five thin slices; its face still intact. It gasped for air, which was weird, considering it had no lungs.

“Finish me,” it whispered between shallow gasps. “End my suffering.”

Calvin took one final sigh, scooped up the slices of mushroom and tossed them into the frying pan. The butter sizzled and hissed on contact.

“HOLY FUCKING SHITBALLS ON A CUNT STICK!! HOW CAN THIS MUCH PAIN EXIST?!”

Calvin squinted and leaned back. He was squeamish at the best of times.

“This is the first time I’ve felt anything in at least forty minutes or so since I was introduced to the cold touch of melancholy! Don’t ever try this, friend! It’s not worth it! Live with the pain! OH FUCKING HELL!”

Calvin turned up the heat, and paced the room until the mushroom’s cries died out. He let it sizzle a little longer than he usually would to ensure the mushroom was well and truly dead. He had lost his appetite somewhat, but he felt it would be dishonourable to not follow through. He plated up the mushroom, seasoned with a little salt and pepper, and sat on the futon. The ball sport game played on in full swing.

It was the best mushroom Calvin had ever tasted. Sweet, buttery, woody, earth tones with a lingering aftertaste of umami. Sublime.

Calvin reflected on the day, and how he could never have seen it panning out as it did. This was going to be one hell of a story for Asha. Asha! Of course, he had a date with her tomorrow. *‘Maybe I’ll put on a nice shirt tomorrow,’* Calvin thought.

FINE