

*The Mushroom Hunters*

by Laura Madeleine

The forest is vast and unknowable. Oak and beech, boar and snail. A thousand years of pine needles hush the feet, even in boots.

Every autumn the hunters come. When the first *drip drip patter* is heard upon the windowpane and the rain scatters the summer-parched dust, they wake from their sleep and share an excited smile with partners, or siblings or the dog at the end of the bed. The morning will bring the hunt.

No other time of year like it; when the sun is strong enough to warm the ground, coaxing out the scent of resin, and the wind streams down the mountain, bringing ancient ice and the promise of mornings snug beneath the blankets.

No other place like it, either. Not France, not Spain, but *Catalonia*: the mouth of the sea, the throat of the mountains, the belly of the land. Fish and fowl and root, all brought together in the darkness of a cooking pot, blackened by years on the stove. No shyness here, only taste. What the earth gives, the lips accept, and nothing more readily than the silent, otherworldly crop of the forest floor.

Mushrooms. Their names are like something from an old tale: Yellow-footed Chanterelle, Grey Knight, Horn of Plenty. Every year hunters take to the hills, joyous with their baskets.

But in one clearing, a woman sits alone. Her eyes are clouded, her vision poor. She is waiting for the forest to give her directions, for that one elusive scent amongst all the others. She takes a deep breath, sorting through aromas: the reek of leaves, dissolving like onions in a pan, the musk of a fox and the dust of crumbling bark.

Then, she frowns, nose wrinkling at a different odour, sharp and artificial. Plastic and new rubber. A man – by the smell of him – young and very clean. She hears him approach through the tide of leaves.

‘*Bon dia!*’ he calls.

He is from the city, trailing the smell of cigarettes and traffic. She can see his outline; tall and gangling, a swipe of blond hair, round spectacles upon his face.

‘*Bon dia,*’ she nods politely in his direction. ‘Are you here for the hunt?’

It takes him a moment to answer. ‘I am.’

He sounds wary, and is wise to be. The locals are protective of their forest plunder.

He clears his throat. ‘They say this is where the best mushrooms are found. The ones that never make it to market. I don’t suppose you’ve seen any.’

He is carrying something. A plastic cool box. She shakes her head and when she speaks, her voice is slow.

‘What they say is true. But I’m afraid you will go home empty handed.’

Even with her limited vision, she can see him bristle with indignation.

‘I’ve barely started!’

She tries not to smile at his outrage, at the fierce heat of youth.

‘Then you have started badly,’ she tells him. ‘Now, either go away or sit down and stop moving the air about so.’

She fully expects him to stomp off into the forest. *Serve him right*, she thinks, *ignorance is no excuse for pride*. But to her surprise, he mutters to himself, walks over in his squeaky new boots and takes a seat on the fallen tree beside her.

She can still smell him, shampoo and strong aftershave. She grunts and scoops a handful of leaf mulch from the ground.

‘Rub this into your neck, boy.’

‘What? Why?’

‘I cannot get the scent with you smelling like a perfumery.’

She feels slim fingers scrape the mess from her palm. A chef’s fingers, or a pianist’s.

The damp leaves crumble against his skin, drowning soap and city with the odours of the forest. She sighs in relief.

‘What is the scent?’ he asks. There’s a grudging respect in his voice. A chef, then, she decides, someone who understands the importance of the senses. He might even learn something today.

‘The scent...’ she lets the words gather upon her tongue. ‘When I was a child, my mother told me that it was like the back of the woodpile on a warm day. Like the root cellar, when the earth on the vegetables is still fresh, like nutmeg, before you grate it.’

‘She took me hunting for the first time when I was six. My father drove us to the edge of the forest. The whole town was there, with their baskets and their boots. But soon, we all scattered, took to our private paths, passed down through the generations. My mama walked into the slopes of the pines, and I followed. It was steep there and dark. I was afraid, but Mama held my hand.’

“Wait,” she told me, and put her head near mine. Then I smelt it, something strange on the breeze. I snuffed at the air until she laughed and pointed the way.

‘I followed the scent, pausing when it faded, hastening when it grew strong until finally I saw them, the mushrooms we hunted. They were blue-grey as the breast feathers of a dove. I dropped to my knees beside them, only to realise I was not alone.’

‘From the other side of the clearing, a boy was watching. Earth clung to his bare knees, and though his cheeks were pink, his eyes were as dark as moss. In his hand was a little metal rake. Together, we looked to the circle, to the biggest mushroom there.’

“It’s mine!” we cried in unison, but I got there first. I closed my hand over the mushroom and he bared his rake, and I do not know what would have happened if our mothers had not arrived. They smiled at each other across the circle, for there was enough to share, even with strangers. And

even though the boy cried and raged, I won the biggest mushroom. A *fredolic*, it was called. It was fragile, mousey grey, sweet and powdery, and my mama made an omelette with it, just for me.'

The old woman's knotted fingers curl, as if she is holding it again.

'How did they decide who won?' the young man asks after a moment, though he seems reluctant to interrupt. 'You said you both saw it at the same time.'

The old woman shrugs. 'There was no question. He was hunting the wrong way.'

The young man's hand strays to his jacket pocket. There's a shape there, something with teeth and a short handle. 'The rake?' he asks.

'The rake,' she agrees serenely. 'Good hunters *never* disturb the leaves. We feel our way, carefully, take the mushrooms in our hands, the way you would a baby bird. Then, the patch is not damaged, and saved for the future.'

'Fine.' The young man is flushed, as he zips his pocket closed. 'No rakes.'

'You remind me of that boy,' she says, with a sly glance. 'The next time I saw him, he was using a bucket, of all things.'

The young man sighs, resigned. 'And what's wrong with a bucket?' The plastic cooler box sits conspicuously at his feet.

'He asked me the same thing. I told him if he didn't know, he should not have been out hunting in the first place.'

Her face softens with the memory.

'I was sixteen, on my own for the first time. I believe I was nervous, or I would not have spoken so. He looked angry, and started to reply, but I found myself noticing the shape of his cheekbones, the green of his irises, still dark as moss, even after ten years. Although I had glimpsed him from time to time, at village fairs or in the big town at weekends, we had never spoken. Perhaps it was the memory of his muddy knees, or of his small face, so indignant at losing his prize, but I found myself laughing and asking him if he remembered the *fredolics*.

"Of course," he said, and started to grin, "I thought you were a fairy."

‘And so I gave in and told him about the bucket. I told him that he must use a basket instead and feed the forest, just as it feeds us. The spores fall through the weave, onto the forest floor, and there they will grow for our children.

‘Not *our* children,’ he teased, but I knew then that we were friends.

‘His name was Oriol. That day we hunted chanterelles amongst the pine needles, sniffed out saffron milk caps and plucked blushing panther caps for pickling. Our hands became muddied, and wet leaves clung to our arms until we looked like a pair of wild things. When at last we sat down to rest the sun was setting, turning the branches of the trees into gold filigree. As I looked at him, a thrill ran through me that had nothing to do with finding a new enclave of *rabassoles*.

‘For although we were scarcely more than children, and although he was from the other side of the forest, I knew that he was mine and I was his, and that was the way it would always be.’

The woman falls quiet. The afternoon trickles back around them. Far away, a single bird is singing, not yet fled for winter. She feels the young man staring, feels too the question in his gaze, even before he asks it.

‘What happened?’

Through the veils across her vision, she seeks out his eyes. Her own are bright.

‘Mushrooms are strange things,’ she says quietly. ‘The best ones are elusive, so delicate that they do not last beyond a day, once picked. There are others that endure. The black chanterelle, the Trumpet of the Dead, is one of those.’

The young man is silent for a time.

‘I am sorry,’ he finally murmurs, but the woman only shakes her head, her face sad and sincere.

‘There is nothing to be sorry for. This hunt, it is not only a pastime; it is more than a prize to be gathered and hoarded. It is our past and our future. It is knowing that decay and bloom, life and death are one, and that although we hold ourselves apart, we humans are no different. Do you understand that at all?’

A sharp breeze blows, bringing with it a smattering of rain, the smell of distant snow and the remnants of the year's growth.

The young man looks down at his brand-new boots, at his plastic box, at himself.

'Yes,' he says slowly. 'I think I do.'

The woman pulls herself up wearily, but the next moment her nose is twitching, her brow creasing in concentration. Her eyes open wide.

'The scent?' The young man is unable to keep the excitement out of his voice.

'The scent,' she nods. 'Can you smell it?'

He leans forward, his face intent. 'I can smell *something*,' he begins doubtfully. 'It is like... the Bois de Boulogne, just after the leaves have fallen. Like the wooden box where my grandmother kept her spices. It smells old, but fresh –' He stops abruptly, and blushes. 'At least, I think so.'

The woman holds up her arm. 'Walk with an old lady.'

Together they wade through the leaves, russet and yellow and lacquer-red. The young man watches closely, tries to keep that furtive scent at the forefront of his mind, like a dream, half-remembered.

The woman's steps are slow but determined as she leads the way towards a gigantic chestnut tree. The young man stops, spellbound. The trunk is vast and time has sculpted the roots into fantastic archways and spirals.

The woman's eyes are closed, her grip slack on his arm. 'I know that smell,' she murmurs dreamily, 'unless I'm wrong it's an *Ou de Reig*, a Royal Egg.'

The young man swallows hard.

'I heard Chef talk about them once,' his voice is hushed, 'he paid a small fortune for just a dozen. He said that they were so delicious, they could have been eaten straight from the ground.'

The old woman makes a noise of acknowledgement.

'You are not so foolish as you look,' she says. 'But here we slow roast them on the edge of the bonfire, with oil from the grove and salt from the shore.'

“We?” the boy asks hopefully, as the woman hurries around the base. He is still waiting for an answer when she stops dead.

Ten paces away, a man is watching, a basket swinging on his arm. He is wiry as an old grape vine, but his eyes are quick, and dark green as moss. There are mud stains on the knees of his trousers. If he is shocked by their appearance, it only takes him a second to recover.

‘It’s mine!’ he cries out.

‘It’s mine!’ the woman echoes and they both hurry towards a patch of ground, where a large mushroom cap sprouts through the leaves, bright as burnished copper.

‘You cheated!’ the old man accuses, throwing down his basket. ‘You said you wanted to rest!’

‘Oh, and what about you?’ the woman demands, levering herself onto her knees, ‘you said you were only going to check on that patch of morels!’

‘You knew I was lying, you just wanted this one all for yourself!’

‘Wait!’ the young man bursts. He looks from the woman to the old man and back again. ‘Who is this?’

‘*This* is my husband, Oriol, and the biggest liar in—’

‘You told me that he was dead!’

For a moment there is silence. Then, the old man’s face splits into a grin and he lets out a huge guffaw, slapping his knee with one mud-covered hand.

‘I told you what you needed to hear,’ says the woman over his laughter, ‘it worked, didn’t it?’

‘Don’t take it too hard, boy,’ the old man says, wiping his streaming eyes on his cuff, ‘some of the best chefs in Barcelona have fallen for my wife’s stories on their first hunt.’ He examines the young man’s face, still red with irritation, and his smile turns mischievous. ‘Anyway, what’s a little humility in exchange for something precious?’

He lifts his hands away from the mushroom. It glows amongst the leaves, a golden egg from a fairy-tale.

The young man looks at the woman, astounded.

‘Go ahead,’ she nods gently.

As he bends down, he thinks about the woman’s words, about the generations who walked this path, about the mushroom spores, infinitesimal, bringing life. He thinks about the living things he encounters every day in his kitchen, about the earth on their hooves or the sun on their leaves. Only then does he reach out a careful hand and pluck the mushroom from the ground.

Like the sundering of a dam, his nose is filled with it: the scent. The woman smiles at the surprise on his face.

‘Welcome to the hunt.’

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