

Mushroom

The spring rains had come to Joplin, Missouri, which meant it was time for Randy to return to his hometown and go hunting for mushrooms. And like he had done every year for a decade, he would call his daughter Kimmie on the telephone and invite her along.

Randy had been a mushroom hunter since he was old enough to walk. The best mushroom to be found in the forests of Missouri was, without a doubt, the morel. Randy's dad explained to him that morel rhymed with Jor-El, which was the name of Superman's dad, the one played by Marlon Brando in the movie. Randy's dad looked forward to the morel season all year. The elusive little mushrooms would only bloom on the forest floor during a few weeks in the middle of spring, and hunters invaded the woods as soon as conditions were right. Some seasons were better than others, depending on the temperature and humidity, but morel hunting could be a challenge in the best years. The ultimate discovery in this game is an untouched patch of yellow morels. There were black ones too, but yellow morels were the tastiest, as far as Randy was concerned. Randy looked for yellows under sycamore trees. Other hunters claimed that elms or oaks were better luck, but Randy stuck with the sycamores. They had been good to him in

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the past, and he believed in loyalty. Patterns and persistence: that's what mushroom hunting was all about.

But the hunt is only the first part of the experience. For Randy, the morel was a succulent delicacy, and over the years he had become quite a mushroom chef. He started the process by rinsing his treasures with cold water; they were always a little dirty and might be infested with bugs. Once rinsed, the morels were ready to be prepared. For a simple snack, he would sauté the mushrooms in butter and garlic; sometimes he used lemon juice. For a more elaborate meal, he could slice each one down the middle, from top to bottom, and dip them in a batter made of eggs, milk, and cracker crumbs before frying the little fellows in shortening. Before his death, Randy's father would whip up a batch of morels with his late wife's fried chicken recipe. Randy didn't care for that, because it made a special treat taste like a regular Thursday night dinner. Now that his mother and father were both gone, he never had to taste that chicken recipe again.

In any case, Randy liked to eat his morels alongside a thick steak. As far as he was concerned, that was the meal of kings.

Unless there was an emergency, like a funeral, Randy didn't get back to Joplin very often. He spent most of the year driving his rig across the country, listening to the radio in the daytime and bunking in the cab or exploring a new motel room every night. Kimmie, his daughter, lived with her grandparents in Joplin and had a fairly comfortable life, as far as Randy knew. His in-laws were well off and lived north of town, away from the feedlots

and stockyards. He never liked them much, and didn't phone them regularly during the year. But when the spring rains came, Randy made the call like clockwork. It had been this way since Kimmie's mother died.

This year, however, Kimmie wasn't home when he called. She was out with friends, her grandmother said. Randy maintained a tense, guarded dialogue with his mother-in-law for about twenty minutes before he ran out of quarters and had to get off the phone in the lobby of the motel. "I'll be there the day after tomorrow," he said. "Tell Kimmie to expect me."

The old lady sounded bothered. "I'll tell her, Randy, but I don't know if Kimmie is free this weekend."

"What could she have planned?" Randy asked. "The girl is only twelve."

"She's thirteen," Kimmie's grandmother said. "She just turned thirteen. But I wouldn't expect you to know that."

Randy counted the years on his fingers. "Time flies," he said. Kimmie's grandmother said goodbye and hung up the phone.

The rig rumbled through the wet, shiny streets of Joplin late on Friday night. Randy enjoyed seeing his old hangouts from up high in the driver's seat: the vacant lot where he once constructed a clubhouse, the elementary school where he first smoked a butt, the baseball diamond where he whacked a line drive into the first baseman's crotch, the drugstore where he had stolen comic books and later bought condoms. He drove past the high school where he met Kimmie's mother, the movie

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theater where they would make out, and the courthouse where they got married. He took a right turn when he reached the park where he had pushed young Kimmie on the swings.

He couldn't see any of these places very clearly in the dark. He had planned to get home in the early afternoon, but the stop in Wichita had taken much longer to unload than expected. Now it was too late to see Kimmie. Or was it? He decided to make a quick phone call and check in.

Randy drove past St. Robert's Church and pulled into the gas station on Elmwood Street. One of his high school buddies owned the place and let Randy park the rig there when he came to visit. Randy always gave him a little bag of morels before leaving town and they called it even. The rig rolled into a spot behind the station and the engine chugged to a halt. The windshield wipers stopped in the middle of a sweep. Randy pulled the parking brake, took a deep breath, and dug into his jeans pocket for change.

"Hi, Fran," Randy said. "Is Kimmie home?"

"Where have you been?" Kimmie's grandmother barked. "We expected you hours ago."

"Wichita was a disaster, that's all. No big deal."

"You should have called, Randy. What were you thinking?"

"I was out of change, Fran. I didn't think it was a big deal."

Kimmie's grandmother fumed, breathing loudly through her nose. "She has been expecting you all afternoon. She was going to see a movie with her friends, but I told her to cancel her plans."

"I'm sorry. What else can I say?" Randy held the payphone to his ear, staring into the darkness, listening to the rain. "Can you

put her on the phone?"

A minute later, Kimmie picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Hello, sweetheart, it's your daddy."

"Hi, Dad." Kimmie wasn't smiling; he could tell that for sure.

"Sorry I'm late, but Wichita took longer than I thought it would."

"Don't worry about it. Are you coming over?" She didn't sound very excited about the idea.

"No...I thought I would just get some sleep here in Todd's parking lot. You know, the Mobil station out on the highway—"

"I know," she said.

Randy cleared his throat. "Anyway, I figured I could come over tomorrow morning and pick you up, and we could get some breakfast, and then go out to the woods. It's morel season, you know."

"Yeah, I know."

Randy was starting to feel like he was intruding. But how could that be? He was her daddy, wasn't he? They set a time to get together, quickly, and got off the phone. That much accomplished, Randy walked back to the rig, squinting to keep the rain out of his eyes, and tried to remember when Kimmie started calling him Dad. Didn't she always call him Daddy before? When did that change?

At daybreak, Randy drove the rig north of town and rolled into the development where Kimmie's grandparents had moved a few years back. Theirs was a small, practical house with a lush