

MAYNARD SMITH AND THE INVISIBLE MAN

By Dan Armstrong

Some of the most beautiful and solemn country in the United States is in western Oregon. From the rugged coast's sheer cliffs and stark rock promontories east seventy miles to the interstate highway is a lush gently mountainous coniferous forest. In the summer, this coastal range is nothing less than stunning. The valleys are long and tight with sweeping green pastures, framed by stands of towering blue firs that climb into a sky as clear as arithmetic. There is a minimum of manageable land here, but what can be plowed is fertile and what can't makes good grazing for cattle and sheep.

The Oregon winter, however, is exceedingly long and wet. When it isn't outright raining, the valleys steam with lacey mist and fog. Low clouds displace the thick periphery of forest in receding stages like false perspective in a Chinese watercolor. What few houses there are wallow at the edges of the low land beneath hovering curls of chimney smoke. Swayback out-buildings jut like partially submerged shipwrecks from behind overgrown tufts of fescue, rusting farm machinery, or forgotten automobiles. The sunless gray beauty is subtle—some might say severe—and the persistent rain from October to April takes a lot of getting used to, especially if you're a logger or a farmer and work outdoors...

At the back of one of these lush, wet valleys, right up where the pasture met the woods and the ground sloped up into the hills, two men were deep amid the process of fence building. It was nearly November and raining heavily, hardly individual drops, more like continuous sheets.

One of the men, Maynard Smith, was battling with a tractor, maneuvering in reverse up a slight grade to where he planned to drill the next posthole. Attached to the back of the tractor was a lightweight drilling rig that could cut through the wet ground like tub margarine—if Maynard could only get the damned thing positioned properly. The ground was too wet. The sod

ripped and tore away as the fat rear tires dug in for traction. The trusty John Deere bucked and slid this way and that, throwing loose chunks of sod and mud all over the man at the top of the slope trying to direct Maynard into position.

Maynard would back off then go at it with some momentum. It was just a short climb, no more than twenty yards. But invariably when he managed to pull to the brink of the hill and tried to hold the crest to set the drill, the tractor would lose its grip and slowly slide back down the grade.

After three equally futile attempts at this, Maynard let the tractor drift to a rest at the bottom of the slope and cut the growling motor with a back-firing pop and a puff of diesel smoke. The man at the top slipped down the grade and tramped over to the tractor. Maynard climbed out of the rig and stood next to his hired hand. Both were wearing full suits of olive green rain gear and black rubber boots with tile red neoprene soles, yet both were soaked inside and out from a whole day of this work. For lingering moments, neither of them said a word.

Of the two, the hired hand, his hood up and cinched tight around his face, looked the worse. He was spattered from head to toe with mud and bits of grass. With an old black Portland Beavers ball cap pulled down tight on his head, Maynard just looked fiercely determined, and he steamed a little like the tractor engine in the sizzling rain. Water dripping steadily off the bill of his cap, his silence was a building one. The hand attempted a few words of solace. "At least it ain't cold like it could be, Maynard."

Maynard wiped his face with a soaking wet red paisley handkerchief and stared hard at the other man, saying nothing because he didn't want to curse. Smith had lived on this farm since he was ten, when he'd moved here with his family from Missouri forty-eight years ago. His sister died during the move, his mother sixteen years later. He and his father hung on to homestead five hundred acres out of the raw Oregon wilderness. Only in the last year or two did Maynard feel that the job was near complete. It could seem so bitterly ironic at times like these when the rain would fall for weeks on end. The old place in Missouri had fallen victim to a drought, and his father, who died eight years back, had decided on this part of the country because of the certainty of rain.

Maynard couldn't really complain though. With a few hundred sheep, a sizeable herd of dairy cows, a big old hen house, and a little country dairy that his daughter and her husband ran, Maynard's job was primarily maintenance now. But it wasn't easy. He worked a lot harder than

most and got less for it.

The sternness of the life made him tough, stubborn, and religious in the way a lot of farmers are. He wasn't one to read the Bible and rarely mentioned the word of Christ. His belief was just a quiet code of honesty and faith in the land. Inner satisfaction came through day to day progress on the farm. It was a simple, good life. Most of his problems were like the one before him now.

"Maybe we got a chance at this one," said Maynard after several minutes of hanging silence. Sometimes it seemed that he spoke as little as he could. "Take the end of the tow line up there and wrap it good around that fat Doug fir."

Pretty soon Maynard had put his scheme together. It was something he'd done before. There was a winch on the back of the tractor. It powered the drill and was fitted with a reel of metal cable and a hook. Once the hand had anchored the cable to the tree, Maynard could use the winch in conjunction with the tractor engine to get the vehicle up the slope and held.

With Maynard working the winch with one hand and the steering wheel with the other, it took some doing. Then all of a sudden the tractor was up the hill. The hand secured it with the cable and freed up the winch to use the drill. The first time they tried lowering the drill, the damned thing bucked left, then right, broke the cable loose and slid down the hill half-sideways. They were at it again immediately. The second time the drill bit. Two minutes later, the hole was done. They unhitched the cable and Maynard slid the tractor down the hill. Hard or easy, this was the way everything was done on the farm—one muddy step at a time.

Because Maynard wanted these fences to last, he was using some mighty big posts he'd cut from the forest and prepared himself with creosote. When wet, it took both men to lift one of these slippery buggers and drop it into place. Maynard struggled, slipping and sliding, back up the grade to help the hand with this.

By the time he reached the hole, the hand was looking into it. It was rapidly filling with water. The hand waited for Maynard to fully appreciate this then spoke. "You know, Maynard," he said, "this rain holds up much longer, we'll be wastin' our time with these here posts."

Maynard didn't say anything. After working in this climate all his life, he hated to stop for the rain. He'd invariably go at it until it sucked him in right up to the neck, then he'd pull himself out with a come-along and spend the next couple of days in the barn working on machinery. He looked down the forest line where there were some hundred more posts to set. He

sensed that the hand wanted to take a break, at least until the rain let up. Maynard had no intention of stopping now. Another week or so and this kind of work would be done for the winter. Every day they delayed, it was only that much more likely to rain the next. He took his position on the post and the hand did the same. They lifted it, straining, and dropped it in the hole with a thick sucking sound. Nothing else was said about the weather.

After the post was packed with gravel and snugly in place, the two men slipped down the hill to the tractor, preparing to move on to the next hole to drill. When they reached the tractor, the hand spoke up. "Hate to say, Maynard. But I think I saw somebody down in that field by the bog yesterday."

Maynard's eyes narrowed with a vague distant anger and drifted to the hired hand's face. The hand nodded his head, yes, to the understood question. Maynard stared off into the shifting curtains of rain. "God damn it." Maynard did not like to use the Lord's name in vain, but he did with this news.

"Check'em out," said a rather shady looking, thirty-year old Jamie Reeves, reaching into the side pocket of his black vest. "Fresh ones like these go twenty-five bucks a hundred or three for a dollar."

A hip young couple from the university sat across from him in a shadowy booth at the rear of a little backstreet tavern in Eugene, Oregon. The boy wore a flannel shirt and blue jeans. The girl had jeans on also with a loose white peasant blouse and very obviously no bra.

Dressed in all black, a long, sun-streaked ponytail trailing down his back and a silver Egyptian cross dangling from his left earlobe, Jamie withdrew a clear plastic baggie and turned it upside down over the table. A glistening heap of fresh psilocybin mushrooms, maybe fifty, none larger than the tip of your little finger, piled out onto the table like root beer colored gum drops. They might have been gold nuggets for the way the young couple's eyes widened. They had never tried or even seen the legendary magic mushrooms before. Both of them selected one from the pile and inspected it beneath the booth's dim yellow wall light. The little brown liberty cap mushrooms, native to the northwest, were translucent like gelatin with a tiny clear nipple on top.

"The hallucinogenic mushroom is sacred to many cultures," said Jamie, making his eyes big and stroking his mustache down around the corners of his mouth.

A so-called street poet and song writer, Jamie made his living peddling marijuana and

cocaine to the University of Oregon college crowd. The mushrooms just happened to be in season now and were a personal favorite. He was out making the rounds of the college bars tonight, hoping to make some quick cash. He'd been picking and eating them all day, and he was quite stoned. "I like to think of them as the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge," he pronounced with drama. "You know, the knowledge of good and evil." He raised a single eyebrow.

The young woman was cute and blonde, probably from California. She held a mushroom daintily by its thin stem and had no idea what Jamie was talking about. He glowered red-eyed at her like a being from another planet.

"It's a physical kind of high," he said suggestively. "Great for sex. Like Ecstasy. But it's organic."

The girl sniffed at the mushroom and made a face. "Smells like dirt," she said, dropping the musky fungus back into the pile as though it might have been a live scorpion.

"How many you take?" asked the young man in a serious tone, as he continued to inspect the mushrooms, paying no mind to Jamie's banter.

"Fresh like this. Five will work. Ten is better. Twenty—who knows!" Jamie winked at the woman. "I have to laugh whenever I do this," he chuckled, "it's not like selling marijuana or cocaine. They're just drugs." He lowered his voice. "These little babies have been eaten as a way to see God for as long as man has written about himself. They're the real thing. Soma. Mescalito. Magic." He hissed in a whisper, then laughed—a little too loud.

The girl gave Jamie a suspicious look. "Then maybe you shouldn't be selling them. Maybe it's some kind of sacrilege."

Jamie laughed, though he had often wondered the same thing. "You mean, like I should be giving them away?" He grinned. "I don't think so."

The young man wasn't listening to any of this. "How much for these fifty?"

Jamie took his eyes off the woman. He scooped up half the mushrooms and let them fall through his fingers like Thompson raisins. "The season is just peaking. These are prime 'shrooms. Three for a dollar. Fifty for fifteen."

The youth looked at his girlfriend. She shrugged. "I'll take'm," said the boy. He pulled out his wallet and found a five and a ten as Jamie pushed the mushrooms back in the plastic bag.

"Where do you pick these things?" asked the young woman as the exchange of money for drugs was made.

Jamie grinned. "It's a secret." He paused staring into her eyes. "Except to very close friends."

"I think I know where a field is," said the male student with a dirty look at Jamie. "We better get going." He stood up. The woman looked up at him and stood also.

"Happy trails," Jamie glimmered as the couple wandered off with their score. He had three hundred more to sell. Halloween was near and they were going like hotcakes. He'd been driving out to the cow pastures west of town every other day, picking five hundred to a thousand of the mushrooms each time and selling them all.

What was crazy was that Jamie in some skewed way did believe that he was selling magic. The mushroom high did give one a certain, perhaps delusional, glimpse of something otherworldly. And it was powerful. Especially when you were as high on them as Jamie was right now.

Alone in the booth, Jamie's salesman focus dispersed and the high began to swell in him. For an instant he imagined himself up above the booth, looking down on the entire bar. He took a deep breath and stared at his hands, laying them flat on the table. Even in the weak light, he was captured by the extreme detail of his skin, the pores, fine lines, and tiny hairs. It was as though he were wearing some uniquely powerful contact lenses. He watched his veins throbbing beneath the thin skin. He thought for a moment that he could actually feel the blood moving in short, quick pulses. He became intensely aware of his heart beating and then his whole circulatory system of arteries and veins, pulsing like independent living things in his arms and in his legs. He took another deep breath in realization of how ripped he really was. He needed to get outside. He looked around haltingly, then got up from his seat and headed for the front door.

On his way out, past the bar on his left and a long wall of smoky booths on his right, he took in the patrons one by one, huddled over glasses of beer or jabbering away mindlessly. He imagined that he could read the mind behind any face he looked into. Diving right into their thoughts through their eyes, reading an entire life history in just a glance. It was a profound but somewhat unsettling feeling. Jamie understood these insights were inspired by the mushrooms, but didn't doubt for one second they weren't accurate. That is, the magic was real.

And yes, he thought again, as he passed out the door into the cold wet night, perhaps there was a karmic debt attached to dealing in the sacred.

Maynard Smith spent the first half of the day well away from his house in another valley, setting those same fence posts. He and his hired hand had been doing this for six days straight now. The rain had let up some and they'd made good progress. The job might be done in a couple days if the weather held this way.

Maynard was feeling quite satisfied as he drove the pickup back to the house for lunch. The hand had gone the other way to town to eat and pick up some supplies. Maynard smiled to himself as he drove. The hardest job was almost complete, and the farm was nearly ready for winter.

As he entered the valley from the west, he noticed a black VW bug parked off the road beside one of his pastures. He slowed his pickup as he passed the VW on his way to his driveway. The muscles in his jaw gradually tightened as he scanned the adjacent pasture. There he was, on his hands and knees, picking things from the ground and putting them into a plastic bag.

“God damned mushrooms,” Maynard cursed through his teeth. But he didn't stop to interfere with the long-haired man in the field. He was too angry. Yeah, he had a temper, and it scared him sometimes. He was so incensed right now he didn't even stop at his mailbox to get his mail. It was just a slow seething crawl up the gravel driveway several hundred yards to the house.

It had all begun five years ago. One Saturday afternoon he came home to find three cars parked along the road next to this one particular pasture. Ten or so long-haired kids were in the field crawling around on their hands and knees. He'd confronted them with relative calm, and starry-eyed they'd explained that they were picking magic mushrooms. All he said was if you poison yourself don't come back complaining to me.

He didn't kick them out that day, but he should have. The following week he was to spend an entire day repairing fences damaged by these intruders.

Then two days after he'd fixed the fences, the kids were in the field again. He left them alone this time, but the next morning he posted the field's fence line with *absolutely no trespassing* signs.

He didn't understand why these people were picking the mushrooms at first, but he soon learned that other farmers were having the same trouble and that the mushrooms were psycho-activating—whatever that meant—and illegal.

A kind of silent war was waged over the next two years between Maynard and the pickers. Each fall about the end of October, when the leaves turned and the rain began, the mushrooms would bloom. And each fall there were kids in the fields disregarding his signs and climbing his fences, looking for free drugs. It drove him to the edge. He was tempted to call the police, but he hated bringing in the law. It was his land. He was responsible for protecting it not somebody else. Yet his response to the pickers had become so emotional, he was afraid to confront them for fear of doing something he might regret, and he was obliged to resort to all manner of subtlety to get them off his property.

One time he broke out his shotgun and fired it a few times into the air from his porch. That scared them off. Another time he got in his truck and drove back and forth next to the pasture until the pickers finally got the message and scampered away. But the best solution came from another farmer. Don't graze cows in the pasture. The mushrooms become less abundant because of the lack of fresh fertilizer, and as the grass grows long, those few mushrooms that do come up become harder and harder to find.

This worked very well. Maynard pulled his cows from the pasture the next two years. The field grew wild. A few pickers came that first fall. None the second. He figured he'd licked the problem, so this summer, he'd let the cattle back into the pasture, just so nature didn't get too out of hand and take the pasture back from him. But sure as the rain falls, with the grass grazed low and the regular dropping of manure, the cows effectively re-cultivated the mushrooms. They came back in full bloom and so did this one picker. And he kept coming back, again and again.

Maynard was hot when he entered the house for lunch. "Damn it, that kid's out there again." The screen door bounced on its hinges behind his slam. "I've been pretty God damn lenient up to now—but this time," he gritted his teeth and angrily pondered the various measures he might take. "I don't know. I just might call the state police."

Out in the dining room, seated at the table, was the silent half of this conversation, Ann Smith, his wife of twenty-eight years. There was nothing anyone could say when Maynard was wound up like this. That he was cursing was the giveaway. He wasn't a regular at the local church, but without much show, he tried to live within the Ten Commandments. It was only at times like these when his usually bridled temper broke that he'd begin to curse.

His lunch sat on a plate across the table from Ann. "Come on in here, Maynard," she

called out to him, “have something to eat.”

Maynard didn't seem to hear her. He just paced back and forth across the living room, entirely distracted by the thought of the picker. Finally he came to a stop before the big picture window that overlooked the field of interest. Though it was some distance off, he could still see the picker as he popped in and out of sight in his business. Lunch would pass in a seething silence today.

Afterward, when Maynard headed back down the driveway to meet his hand across the valley, he noticed that the black VW had left and the picker was gone. He relaxed considerably with this and by the end of the day had forgotten the mushroom picker entirely.

Jamie Reeves had picked the magic mushrooms for several years. And each new season, as fall pressed into the rainy season, he would patrol the fields waiting for their bloom. Because of the money to be made, there was considerable competition between veteran pickers, and the fields where the mushrooms flourished, which might be one in twenty northwestern Oregon cow pastures, were tightly kept secrets. Jamie's particular success this season resulted from his finding a field he had never harvested before. And by his third visit there, it seemed clear that no one else knew about it either. Thus with no competition, his only real concerns were keeping the field secret and avoiding the owner of the field, who'd plainly posted the property—*no trespassing*. So, every other day, as the weather allowed, Jamie would head out to his “new claim” and pick for an hour or two, then move on to lesser fields as the day wore on.

This new field was twenty miles directly north from Eugene on the interstate, then another thirty-two miles directly west on Route 33. The rural two-lane road rose and fell through several pastured valleys as it wound easily through the coastal range. As one neared the site, the highway climbed a steep hill and dropped slowly into a long thin valley. More or less indistinguishable from many such valleys in western Oregon, it had a few worn farm buildings at the east end and one modest residence set back on a hill midway through. The “M. Smith” mail box at the bottom of this home's driveway marked Jamie's treasured field.

Jamie assumed that the owner of the field lived in that solitary house and, with all the *no trespassing signs*, was entirely aware that the mushrooms were growing there. In five visits, Jamie had also noticed a certain beige pickup that stopped at the “M. Smith” mailbox about noon each day then turned up the long driveway to the house at the top of the hill. The driveway

passed directly along the east edge of the pasture. With all due respect for the signs and the owner, Jamie made every attempt to be on the west side of the pasture when noon approached and to be as invisible in his operation as possible. Etiquette was everything when entering another man's property against his wishes to harvest sacred mushrooms and sell them for profit.

So whenever Jamie came to pick, he always drove the length of the valley, past the field, to apprehend the scene. If there was anything going on, men at work or another picker, he'd just continue on out the west end of the valley and head to some other field. He could come back another day. Etiquette was everything.

On the first pass of Jamie's sixth visit, the field was empty, as it had always been so far. When he reached the far end of the valley, he parked his car off the road, not quite so close to the pasture as he had before, and walked the mile and a half back to the field. Standing alongside the fence, Jamie took a quick look up and down the highway, then slipped quickly between the strands of barbwire. He moved to the back of the field, away from the road, and began his methodical combing harvest. He wore a green fleece jacket and black jeans to blend in with the field. He kept low and alert, moving from one patch of tall marsh grass to another, eyes on the ground.

Jamie did not want to be seen at all, by anybody. It was just as important to be invisible to the farmer as it was from others passing on the Route 33, whether the state police or other pickers. The presence of one picker in a field, especially on a weekend, could often lead to a great number of passersby stopping to join in. This Jamie expressly wanted to avoid, for his own precaution and profit. For the next two hours, he crept slowly through the back edge of the field and stilled at the sound of any approaching vehicle on the road.

The particular variety of mushroom that Jamie collected was very small and hard to detect in the grass. An inexperienced hunter could easily pass through a field in rich blossom without noticing a single one. Experienced pickers try to fathom the growing pattern unique to each field. The underground root system, the mycelium or tree of the mushroom, might extend throughout the pasture. And from one day to the next, depending on how wet it was, either higher or lower areas of the field produced the most fruit.

Jamie had his own theory. He always ate the first five mushrooms he found. He felt that with their high his eyes became attuned to the colors of the field, and the tiny mushrooms stood

out and were easier to find. It also helped in his melding with the field. It was easier to get into the role of being invisible when he was stoned. He stuck to this procedure today and ate five mushrooms early on.

A little after noon, Jamie recognized the building drone of M. Smith's approaching pick-up long before he saw it. He ducked behind a tall clump of marsh grass and was well out of view when the old Dodge stopped at the mailbox then turned in the driveway. Once the truck began to ascend the hill, Jamie returned to his picking.

When Maynard reached the top of the driveway, he cut the engine and climbed from his truck. He started toward the house then turned and gazed out upon the valley. All the land as far as he could see was his. He had made it his life to wrest it from the surrounding press of the wild. Every day he held it, its value went up. At three thousand dollars an acre, he was almost twice a millionaire. This amounted to his wages for all the hours of labor in his life. As an hourly rate, it didn't amount to all that much, but the farm was his and his alone—and that was what mattered.

Maynard turned his gaze to the lowest, wettest part of the valley, about two acres of thick marsh and about three of very wet, partially submerged pasture. This five-acre parcel of land held more than a mushroom history for Maynard. It spoke of the difference between his father's beliefs and his own. Forty plus years ago, when they were first laying out the farm, his father had found several Native American artifacts in that low-lying piece. He came to believe that it had been some kind of sacred site or burial ground for the Willamette Indians who had lived on this land a hundred and fifty years before the Smith's plow first broke ground. Out of deference to this ceremonial site, Maynard's father had decided to leave this little parcel, out of all their five hundred acres, alone. He never felled a tree, never tried to till.

Maynard never attempted to convince his father otherwise, but he was not of the same mind as his dad. Maynard thought of that single spot of uncultivated land in the middle of his lush valley as a blemish, a symbol of superstition and irrationality. Less than a year after his father's death, Maynard cleared the five acres and tilled it all. As it turned out, about half the parcel was too low to make use of. It flooded every year and proved to be a perpetual swamp. The other half made for good pasture most of the year, but was really too wet the rest. That the mushrooms should come to bloom in this pasture only added to the peculiar feelings Maynard had about this piece of his property.

Despite his decided turn to cold rationality and simple faith, he was often visited by the strangest thoughts about this low-lying pasture. More than once he'd dreamed that the parcel had, in fact, been an ancient Indian burial ground and that the mushrooms were the sprouted eyes of the Willamette Indians buried there. Images of painted primitives, dancing naked, holding mysterious mushroom rites, haunted him off and on through the years like a deep racial memory. It made him superstitious in a way he didn't like, and against all his better judgement, he often wondered if there wasn't something amiss in his beautiful valley.

Maynard was a strong and severe man. He'd fought the elements all his life. No task had been too hard it couldn't be done in some way. He'd used his brain. He'd used his brawn. Only to the Will of God and the Fire of the Glory did he humbly bow. But there's a wrinkle in every mind out there, and in the case of Maynard Smith, his wrinkle was this piece of ground.

This little wrinkle was also part of the reason he'd never called in the police or interfered bodily with the pickers—aside from posting the field. He'd even overdone that one year, putting up so many signs he'd all but marked the field as the one with the proper fungi. He didn't understand it, but something about that marsh and the time of year and the mushrooms made him especially thoughtful in a way he usually was not.

Amid these complex thoughts, gazing absently down at this lowest land in the valley, Maynard chanced to spot the mushroom picker moving slowly across the far west edge of the pasture. His heart rate immediately began to climb. His jaw clenched and pinched his lips white. His eyes darted to the shotgun in his pickup's gun rack. He struggled mightily to contain himself and stared with heat down at the man far across the field.

Jamie suddenly realized that he was being watched. He peeked up from his crawling crouch to see the farmer standing by his truck, looking down on him from the hill. Jamie stopped moving immediately, but kept his eyes on the man, waiting to see what the man was going to do. He imagined for a moment that his eyes, at this impossible distance, two hundred yards or more, had caught the eyes of the man above and that a communication had passed from the farmer to him. The overriding message was disdain. The farmer knew exactly what he was doing. Picking the magic mushrooms and selling them for profit. Jamie went from feeling invisible to feeling naked.

As the moment held and the two men watched each other, Jamie felt such guilt about

what he was doing that he considered going up to the house and asking the farmer for permission to be there. But no, it was too late. He was too high for that. Besides the man was turning away now and heading into the house. Jamie decided he'd better leave before the man finished his lunch. He picked ten more mushrooms then began to work his way out of the field to his car.

Ann heard the front door open and close. She was in the kitchen making lunch. She stepped away from the counter so she could see out into the living room.

"Hello, Honey," said Maynard shedding his work jacket.

"You see that young man down there in the field?" asked Ann warily.

"Don't remind me." He shook his head with a half-hearted dejection as he entered deeper into the house.

Ann met him in the dining room with a plate in each hand. A glass of milk was already at Maynard's place. "I wonder what it is about them mushrooms that makes the kids come out here like they do?"

Maynard didn't answer Ann's question, mostly because he didn't want to use profanities. He just turned back to the big living room window and stared out toward the field. He didn't see the picker. Even though Maynard was certain the man must still be out there, it was easier to take when he was out of sight and stayed out of sight. The picker could seem fairly harmless out there alone. It was the likelihood of drawing other pickers that gnawed at Maynard. When there were five or ten of them out there, he was likely to blow his stack and shoot them all. No fences could last a season of thoughtless mushroom pickers—and it only took one to get that started.

Maynard absently drifted to the table and sat down, entirely forgetting that his wife had asked him a question.

When Ann slid a sandwich laden plate in front of him, she asked again. "Why would anyone want to eat something that grew out there in those manure filled fields? That gets me. I mean, that's stooping pretty low to get high." She smiled at her own words. "How could it be worth it, Maynard?"

Maynard looked down at his sandwich mercifully. He decided again not to use profanity. He knew if he began to speak on this subject that had of late also been nagging at the back of his mind—like what crazed state of intoxication would this young man be in when he went down there and confronted him with the *absolutely no trespassing* signs that were posted in plain sight

all around the field—he'd never get to his lunch. So he calmed himself and said, "Haven't a clue, Ann." Then he whispered a word of thanks to the Lord and bit into his meatloaf sandwich.

Ann sat down across from him. "Do you think, Maynard, it could be like drinking alcohol? And getting drunk?"

"Got me," said Maynard chewing a second mouthful of sandwich.

"This does puzzle me, Maynard," she said with mock exasperation. "They say it's like smoking pot or taking tablets of L-S-D. Could that be? Could we be growing L-S-D right out there in our cow pasture?" What she'd asked quieted her for a moment.

Maynard looked up from his sandwich. Wordlessly he gazed at his wife. He took another bite and nearly finished off the first half of the sandwich. When he'd fully chewed and swallowed it and washed it down with a drink of his own cow's milk, he answered. "You know, Ann," he said, poised to put the rest of the sandwich in his mouth, "you just might have answered your own question." He was about to take that last big bite when he saw the pickle on his plate. He put down the sandwich and delicately popped the sweet pickle into his mouth.

"How's that Maynard?"

As he savored the pickle, sweet and sharp, Maynard realized his anger was gone. It had just eased out of him. He even felt a smile trying to twist his old face out of its perpetual emotionless mask. Though often buried by the tasks of hard labor, Maynard did possess an apt and wry sense of humor. "Ann," he said, "those mushrooms are probably just like L-S-D."

Ann thought a minute then asked. "What is L-S-D like?"

Two days later, Jamie woke early in a college dorm room. There was a young woman in the bed with him. She had bought some coke from him the night before, and he had turned the deal into some action. She was still asleep. He didn't especially want to talk to her, so he got up quietly and slipped out of the room and out of the dormitory.

It was nice day for a change. The sun was out. There were big cumulous clouds in the west, but mostly it was brilliant blue sky .As Jamie drove back to his little two-bedroom house, he decided it might be a good day to make another venture to the mushroom fields—maybe the last of the season.

Jamie knew he'd been spotted the last time he went, so he was going to take every precaution this time. He'd purchased a set of camouflaged army fatigues, and today he'd put them

to the test. With an olive-green stocking cap, knee-high black rubber boots, the suit of camey, his sideburns and long ponytail, he looked a little like Ted Nugent, he thought, checking himself out in the mirror. Truth was, he relished his part as the dark, counter-culture poet, stalker of the rare and sacred magic mushroom. There was something tragically romantic about it. He wasn't the mythic man. He was the swamp thing, the shadow of the myth.

Also new to Jamie's guerilla game was a bicycle rack on the back of his VW bug. He strapped his mountain bike to the rack and buzzed out the freeway to Route 33 and took that west. As usual when he reached the magic valley, he motored all the way through. The field was empty and the farmer's pickup was no where in sight. He parked a mile further off than the last time, unbuckled his bike, and pedaled the extra distance back to the mushroom field. Once there, he stashed his wheels in the weeds along the road and quickly crawled into the field. The season was clearly coming to an end. The pickings were slim. So Jamie ate the first ten mushrooms he found in preparation for a thorough and final search.

By the time he heard the sound of Smith's truck, he was well into his invisibility imaginings. Especially in the suit of camouflage, he considered himself more than ever at one with the pasture and some kind of human chameleon. Completely unseeable.

And he wasn't too far off. Maynard hadn't seen the black VW as he drove into the valley nor had he seen the bicycle in the weeds. After stopping at the mailbox, he took a long look at the field as he motored up the driveway and still didn't see the picker.

After lunch Maynard lingered in his chair long after Ann had cleared the table and disappeared into another part of the house. He was idly looking out the window toward the low pasture of note. He could not see the picker nor did he even think he was there. For that reason, he was not in a state of agitation, and he allowed himself to ponder the field he would usually rather forget. He thought a long time about something that he concluded should have been obvious all along. Finally he got up from the table and ambled out of the house to his pickup. Before he got into the cab, he stopped and turned to linger again on the black spot in his valley.

For all his life, Maynard had seen God through nature. That is, he imagined that the changes in nature directly and indirectly reflected the various moods of God. God was always in communication with him in that way. He did not think himself special in this. It was just that living as he did in his own valley, his own corner of the universe, everything that happened, good

or bad, wet or dry, seemed a reflection of God's feelings toward Maynard Smith. Today, with the sun shining so benevolently for a change, he was finally able to look down upon the dark pasture without trouble. During lunch he had made the decision to never pasture the field again. He would abide by what seemed to be the wishes of both his father and his god.

He climbed into his pickup and motored slowly down the gravel driveway, wondering how long it would be before he'd have to re-grade it. When he reached the bottom of the driveway, he came to a full stop. He looked out into the pasture, still not seeing the picker, though half-imagining he would, very satisfied with his latest decision.

In this rare empathetic moment, Maynard recalled the question Ann had asked about the mushroom high two days ago. He found himself wondering if the picker would eat the mushrooms while he picked them. Or did he eat them alone at night or at parties with other mushroom eaters? Or what? L-S-D. L-S-D. These three letters ran across his mind. He repeated them aloud. "L-S-D." What was it anyway? He remembered seeing something about it in the newspapers many years ago. An hallucinogenic drug. That's what they called it. Technology's answer to God. Religion in a tablet. An ugly idea, he thought. Turn on, tune in, drop out. What did that mean? It was too foreign to him to understand. A farmer's life was tuning in. Tuning in to nature. Tuning in to the real God not some kind of chemical in a tablet.

He turned right out of the driveway and pulled the truck up to the south edge of the pasture. He got out and let himself into the field through the cattle gate. His curiosity had finally gotten the better of him. For the first time, he was actually going to find one of the little buggers himself.

The moment Jamie had heard the truck door slam up at the top of the hill he'd stilled himself behind a clump of tall marsh grass. Completely hidden, he watched the truck roll down the hill. He was certain he hadn't been seen, but his heart began to race when he saw M. Smith pull up alongside the gate, climb out of the truck, and enter the field. In the suit of camouflage and stoned on mushrooms, it wasn't exactly the best time to get up and introduce himself. Jamie had no choice. He committed himself to invisibility and lay out on his belly in the cold, wet, soggy grass.

As there weren't many mushrooms out that day, it took Maynard quite a while to find one. Walking at random in the pasture, head down, stooping every now and then to inspect the

ground, he recalled his dreams about the mushrooms being the sprouted eyes of Indians. Suddenly two of them, like eyeballs on thin stems, were peering up at him from the grass. Though there were many different types of mushrooms that grew all over the valley, Maynard knew immediately these were the ones. He knelt down and delicately plucked one of them, all along thinking of it as a sprouted eye, and he held it up into the sunlight.

From Jamie's close hand perspective not fifteen yards away, this scene was stunning in its immediacy. His senses were tuned to the utmost, and his mind was in that transient state that tends to highlight the symbolic in everything. In wide splaying angles of light, the farmer had walked right before the sun, sitting low in the south, gone to a knee and picked a mushroom. Jamie couldn't believe it. It looked like the man was going to eat one.

Then, from across the short distance, Jamie could just detect a soft, low voice. *The man was praying.* The trees, the clouds, the sky, the wide open were fraught. The man's words, directed to some invisible entity, seemed to walk one by one, suspended in dilating time, across Jamie's mind.

“Sometimes I think us farmers are the only ones that got any idea who you are any more, Lord. We wake up every morning about the same time as you and start dealing with the problems of existence as soon as we can get a cup of coffee down and a seat on the throne. Well, I think you and I, we see eye to eye pretty much of the time. And I may be a dumb farmer, or maybe just dumb, I guess, but I'm trying my darndist to lay my slate clean before you.

“We all have personal struggles. That's what life is about, I suppose. But my struggle, year in and year out, is with you. Fighting your seasons, your weather, your whim. It's my farm against your nature. Be sure I've pounded many a stake in your name.

“But I know for sure, the clearest, cleanest vision of life comes from your earth. And no one is closer to that than the plain old digging-in-the-dirt farmer. I know I can be pretty dang slow sometimes, but let's just say I think I finally heard the message you been trying to tell me for some time now. Pardon the mule in me, but Dad was right. This land was not meant to be cultivated for some reason a lot bigger than me or this farm, and it has something to do with these mushrooms.” He looked at the one in his hand and slowly shook his head. “I can't say I understand, but it ain't for me to understand everything.” He looked up into the sky. “It seems grazing animals cultivate these suckers and they just ain't meant to be cultivated.”

Something in the elements had sprung in Maynard. Never before had he spoken spontaneously aloud to his god. It felt a little strange to him as he pondered the mushroom still in his hand, but it also felt strangely good. “I’m giving you back this land,” he said finally.

When Maynard’s mind caught up with the words that had tumbled from his mouth, he bowed his head. And as he bowed his head, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a chance movement of the lowly mushroom picker eavesdropping in the grass. His emotions were so filled with premonition he instinctively held his composure and pretended not to have seen through the veil of camouflage.

Maynard had, really, no idea that he would pray aloud when he entered the field. He had meant what he said and he’d spoken more emotionally to the air than he knew he could—as a simple man humbled before his god. It embarrassed him that this sentimental outpouring had been before a stranger. Then he was ashamed for being embarrassed for speaking openly to his god. But he was still tremendously angry for the invasion of property and privacy. Only a sudden stroke of humor in Maynard prevented what could have been a very ugly scene.

“While I’m here, Lord,” he continued on aloud as though he’d seen nothing. “I’d like you to pass something along to that fella who does your mushroom picking.”

Nearby, Jamie Reeves was already poised on every word, but when the farmer mentioned “mushroom picking,” his ears glowed red. From any other perspective, it was manifest absurdity. The one man on his knee was whispering to a man prone in the wet grass nearly fifty feet away. But because there was something extremely potent in the circumstances, a scream could not have made the message any clearer to Jamie. As stoned as he was, it felt as though this man’s god was really there, gleaming out of the sky like the sun, and listening attentively.

“Now I’m not one to cast judgement on another man’s life, and I know deep down that picker is just another pawn, like myself, in your larger munificence. Maybe he’s just someone you had to invent to get this message across to me, I don’t know. But could you, please, ask him one thing for me next time you see him?” Maynard allowed himself a covert peek at the camouflaged picker with the ponytail. “Ask him what in Hell’s name he’s doing with these magic mushrooms he’s been picking? Because as far as I’m concerned they’re mine, and I don’t want to be any part of an illegal operation. And then tell him, if I ever catch him out here again, I’ll shoot

his camouflaged-ass so full of rock salt he'll think he ate Mexican for a week. So help me, God. Amen.”

With that Maynard stood and tossed the mushroom into the air. He turned and headed back to the pickup without another word.

Needless to say, Jamie Reeves was blown away. He hadn't been invisible at all. The farmer had seen him and spoken directly to him all along. And the words had struck Jamie with the full mystic meaning that made the mushrooms magic to him. He had witnessed a man talking with sentiment and feeling to his god, and it had seemed real. And it was humbling. He wanted to sink right there into the muddy ground and really disappear. Because more than anything else, Jamie felt like he'd been reprimanded by the Holy Spirit, or whatever it might be, through the vehicle of M. Smith, for selling the sacred like candy. The mushrooms really were capable of giving a human the capacity to see through the veil. And it had just happened to Jamie very powerfully. Clarifying what he'd also known but denied. Natural hallucinogens were an important sacrament, not a recreational banality. Selling them for profit broke the covenant with the magic. By doing this Jamie had forfeited the privilege. He would never pick the mushrooms again.

Within the cab of his pickup, Maynard let go a soft chuckle. He knew it was over for good now, because never before had the mushrooms inspired anything close to a laugh in him. He started the truck and drove off. As he drove, however, the instance of his spontaneous prayer and apology swept over him. He could dimly sense that momentarily he had felt the full mystic presence. Maybe his words were dumb human utterance, but the inspiration was authentic. He'd spoken openly and honestly to the invisible spirit that guided his life. It felt good and the silly little mushrooms had prompted it.

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