

## Mushrooms

[Excerpt from Sterling Road: True Stories of Love, Lust, and Lug Nuts  
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“THERE’S A PART-TIME JOB UP ON STERLING ROAD.”

Randy Swoboda’s friends never knew when he was joking. Seated at Mama Lu’s, we sipped our Cokes.

Brian asked, “A job doing what?”

Randy squeezed his eyes to slits. “Picking mushrooms.”

“*Picking mushrooms?* You serious?”

“Serious as a heart attack,” Midwest transplant Randy drawled. “Carl Poretta needs mushroom pickers real bad.”

Brian and I didn’t know that mushroom farms had been operating for generations up on Sterling Road. Randy told us there were two, and Poretta’s needed help.

This was a time in the Pocono Mountains before every inch of land between Tannersville and Tobyhanna would be subdivided into overpriced lots for bargain-hunting city people. For me, Brian, and Randy, it was a time for cracking jokes and fulfilling our personal mandates: cars and girls, though I was the only one with a car that winter. Picking mushrooms didn’t fit anybody’s concept of cool, but we all needed extra cash.

Poretta’s mushroom farm was set back from the road behind a row of tall cedars. Four long white windowless buildings soon came into view, flanking an old three-bedroom Cape Cod. I parked the Blue Monster in the wide yard, which was scattered with dirt, straw, and mounds of dirty snow.

At the side of one of the mushroom houses, we entered a small dusty office in a shed crowded with equipment, boxes from laboratories, and a wall of red batteries and miners' hats.

"I'm Carl Poretta. That's Marie."

Carl's square-jaw and dark skin gave him the looks of a movie star. His baritone voice had a softness to it. Next to a one-desk chemistry lab, a stocky blonde woman in tight threadbare jeans stood at a table weighing a three-pound basket of snowy white mushrooms, flicking off bits of dirt as she did so. She slid a sheet of blue tissue paper over the mushrooms, covered the basket with a thin wooden lid, folded down the wire handles, and added the basket to a stack growing on a nearby pallet. Marie barely acknowledged the boys with a glance as she chose a new basket from a nearby stack.

"Hi guys. We're really glad you're here."

We hung our coats on hooks.

"I hope you don't mind," Carl said. "Let's get started right away."

Carl showed us how to put on the red hardhats with the lights and loop our belts through the battery packs. We held back grins as we switched on our lights and panned our heads around the office. Carl told us to grab paring knives, some nine-pound baskets, and follow him.

"Wait." Marie turned Carl around and fixed the clip on his belt. She turned the big guy around again and pecked him on the cheek. "Go."

He winced. He smiled. "Marie."

I thought Marie looked like an older Ann-Margaret.

Carl led us into the darkness of the mushroom house, where the pale golden lamp lights illuminated a terrain carpeted with little white heads. We beheld a dark mushroom civilization that smelled of soil, fermented manure, and acrid spawn.

Each mushroom house was sixty-feet long and twenty-four feet wide. Two long rows, twelve beds high, stretched away on both sides of a center aisle. The wooden beds were eight inches deep, six feet across, and with eighteen-inch spaces between them that allowed a picker to reach in from the sides. Above the sixth bed, an overhead plank ran down the middle of the aisles, creating an upper walkway for access to the top six beds. Carl cautioned us to be careful not to fall through to the concrete floor below.

Dense on the beds, the plump mushrooms grew in singles, clusters, and clumps, in sizes from a thumb to a small doorknob. Like pristine life forms in some silent alien cavern, their heads seemed to tilt in mystical attitudes atop stalks, short and long. I cocked my head, throwing my light down one of the long beds. In the parabola of the light beam, I saw a rippling sea of white caps disappearing far into the distance.

Picking a “break” of mushrooms was going to be a lot of work.

“You start down here at the bottom bed,” coached Carl, an intently focused man, “and work down to the end. Then you move up to the next bed.” Careworn at fifty, he always seemed to be struggling for breath. “When you’re done down here, go upstairs. And stay on the plank.”

“Looks like I’m ready for ‘bed,’” yawned Randy, and we guffawed. But Carl neither made jokes nor paid attention to ours. He wasn’t harsh, exactly. He was focused. He waited patiently in earnest until our tittering ceased. Then he showed us how to pick a mushroom without scuffing the head.

“Neatly,” he enunciated with full lips. “*Neatly.*”

He popped a mushroom off the bed with a delicate *unch* sound, a little clump of dirt clinging to its base, hairy with white spawn threads.

“Cut off the stump just above the dirt,” Carl instructed. The mushroom tumbled into the basket, and the stump into a galvanized bushel bucket that we would drag along with us.

“I’m driving a truckload down to Kennett Square,” he said. “If you have any questions, ask Marie.”

With the click of the door latch, we found ourselves staring at each other. Then the chitters started as we snapped our heads back and forth throwing our lights around like a Hollywood premiere.

“*We’re lost in the mines!*” Randy and I mock-screamed. “*We’re lost in the mines!*”

“Come on, guys,” responsible Brian cautioned, “we’d better get started.”

I pulled a mushroom and nipped off the stump. “Hey, we’re circumcising mushrooms for a living—*ouch!*”

Randy hung his old paint-spattered radio on the wall and the Stones crooned *Ruby Tuesday*. The pure perfection of the mushrooms fired my imagination. Randy, Brian, and I were the first humans to touch those cold delicate mushroom caps. *Gingerly. Carefully. Neatly.* With amateur eyes and nervous fingers, we started out slowly. The endless rhythm of bending and reaching quickly became a habit, and we moved down the beds, section by section, periodically returning to the office for the bathroom or soda machine. Once we spread out, Brian and Randy seemed far away from me, like surgeons tinkering on patients in a darkened medical theater. The paring knives were so old they’d been sharpened down to an inch in length. Razor sharp from Marie’s whetstone, the knives cut through the stems against our thumbs, which soon took on dozens of thin cuts where the dirt ground into the skin. In the darkness, the radio helped the hours pass.

Two weeks into our mushroom-picking careers, we boys had become old hands, punching our time cards, donning our hats, and entering the eerie mushroom universe knowing what to do.

The temperature and humidity were perfect, Marie told us, but, for some reason, this seemed to worry her. We were astounded by how fast they grew. After finishing a long bed, we would dump our stumps outside the loft door. Upon returning, however, we could see new buttons already above the dirt down at the other end.

For the next several weekends, Brian, Randy, and I picked mushrooms at Poretta's, saving every nickel for cars or gas, and scheming to cop six-packs of beer for our weekend binges out in the woods.

Carl pretty much left us unsupervised. We tried only a couple more times to joke with him, but Carl wouldn't loosen up. Not that we could complain about Carl. He was generous and fair. He had a strength that inspired us to do a good job, and Marie seemed to have a soft spot for teenage goof-offs. She had the patience of a den mother and took her time explaining things. During a cigarette break, she explained how mushrooms were sold.

"Farmers from all over drive their mushrooms to brokers in Kennett Square. It's the Mushroom Capital of the World," she said with a smile. "The best looking mushrooms sell as fresh, the kind you find in the baskets at the supermarket. Bruised buttons go to canning, and the rest to the soup companies." Marie fussed with the baskets, aligning them just so. "Believe it or not," she added, "when the conditions are too perfect, mushrooms can actually grow too fast."

The weeks passed, and the Poretts seemed increasingly worried. We boys figured it was about money, but Carl and Marie revealed unguarded hints about other troubles. Near the house was a maple tree spread out over a new swing set that Marie glanced at often when they were outside. They also mentioned trouble with one of their daughters and the recent loss of a grandchild. Marie seemed angry at Carl, too, though we had no clue what that was about.

We got faster at picking and after a time received a raise to \$3.25 an hour. When we were in the mushroom houses working by ourselves, the jokes never stopped.

“Why, you’re nothing but a *goddamn mushroom picker*.”

“All right, ya *goddamn mushroom picker*, give me a swig of that Coke.”

“Hey! No backwash, ya *goddamn mushroom picker!*”

“I’m going out with Dara tonight,” grinned Randy in his slow, measured monotone. “But I ain’t tellin’ her where I work.”

Brian and I said in unison, “Course not, cuz you’re nuthin’ but a *goddamn mushroom picker*.”

Randy wanted to buy himself a GTO—fat chance at \$3.25 an hour, eighteen hours a week. Brian was the thrifty one. He saved every penny and studied cars—*really* studied them. He read *Hot Rod* and *Motor Trend*. He knew the options available for a Camaro, Mustang, and Charger. He knew all the cars from 1950 on. The models. Stock factory engines. As for me, I was just saving for a new carburetor for the Olds, as my present one had started catching fire. The hood bore a five-inch black circle in the center, indelible testimony to fires past, which sometimes occurred with passengers on board.

“Don’t worry,” I would assure them, hopping out of the car. “It happens all the time.”

We worked Fridays after school, most Saturdays, and again Sunday. There was a lot more to learn, and Carl showed us each step like a conscientious instructor, looking each one of us in the eye with his rocky chiseled face and holding things delicately in gnarly, callused fingers.

Next we learned “dirtin’.”

“We only get four breaks from a bed before we have to load out, so between breaks, we toss dirt over the holes left after we pick.”

When a mushroom was picked, a little clump of dirt lifted off with the stump, leaving a hole in the soil that revealed the hairy white spawn on its manure substrate. The spawn could produce another mushroom if treated right. Once a bed was picked, we crawled along it with buckets of dirt. We'd scoop a handful of powdery, sterilized loam from a galvanized tub and dash enough into each hole to cover it—that was “dirtin’.”

Carl would watch us periodically, and we'd work extra fast when he was around. But as soon as he left, the jokes would start again.

“Pass me some dirt, you *goddamn mushroom picker*,” we'd growl like Yosemite Sam, over and over, reaching across the beds to fill the holes.

Several weeks later, it was time to load out the houses. The last few days, I had noticed dump trucks regularly pulling into the yard, dumping tons of fresh, steaming horse manure from area riding stables into a growing pile. We couldn't get to the car without gagging from the stench.

“The rest of the horse shit'll be here Saturday,” Carl told us, “so come in early for mixing.”

“*Mixing...?*”

He walked away, preoccupied as usual.

Picture sixty tons of horse manure, like a six-foot-tall mastaba, covering an area about fifty feet by thirty. The mound sits there and ferments, steaming up through the morning dew, growing hotter, and with redolent juices trickling out in rivulets from the edges. The acrid blooming stink is a palate of smells—sweet and sour, gassy, and horsey. The first time I mixed, I couldn't stop gagging.

“This manure really *stinks*, Carl.”

“We don't call it manure,” he explained, his eyes smiling for once. “We call it shit. ‘Cuz that's what it is.”

Once I got past the stench, I felt even more nauseous to realize that the smell was actually kind of sweet. Sickeningly sweet, and made a burn in the back of the nose. This was the rich stuff that feeds life. Amid the swooning, my young mind wrapped around the cycle of it. We mixed chemicals into the heap, then turned it with a rig mounted on top of a shaky old farm tractor. The rig's twirling arms picked up the manure in front, turned and mixed it overhead, and churned it back down behind the tractor, raining clods and straw onto Carl, who was wearing what amounted to a fisherman's rain outfit. As the sixty tons of manure cooked there for days, we moved on to loading out the spent houses.

The bizarre fantasy of mushroom farm work escalated to a new level when we hooked up little trolley tracks through the house. Over the narrow steel tracks, we would roll four-foot long flat gondolas to receive the old dirt. Using long rakes and shovels, we dragged out the old dirt, spawn, and packed manure from the previous crop, and loaded it into tubs. Then we'd push the gondolas out to the end of the house over an elevated trestle and tip the tubs over. Little by little we built a mountain of old shit, dirt, stumps, and spawn, which was then hauled away by farmers in need of cheap bulk fertilizer.

In the meantime, once the entire house was emptied, all the boards from the sides and bottoms of the beds had to be turned up and steam-cleaned.

"You mean we're going to sterilize the *shit*?" asked Randy slyly.

"That's how it's done," said Carl. He elucidated. "You have to kill off any bacteria and mold, or you could lose the whole investment."

To sterilize the mushroom house, Carl connected a thick hose to a boiler in the next building. The deafening steam rattled and hissed from the nozzle as he sterilized the boards. It was a dangerous job that he wouldn't give to us boys.

“High-pressure steam can cost you an arm or even kill you,” he explained.

So we worked behind him, jogging the sterilized boards back into place as he moved along. When that process was complete and all the boards were replaced, we chose pitchforks and began loading new manure into the tubs on the gondolas. The stinking manure had ripened into a potent mix, oozing a pungent, creamy brown gravy. It took days to load all the beds to within an inch of the top. The sterilized house was soon sickeningly sweet with fresh manure, and now ready for spawn.

We watched Carl closely as he spread the precious and expensive white spawn from bottles that he had brought back from Kennett Square. After the spawning, he pitched in to help us cover the beds with an inch of fine black soil. He staggered the houses so the crops didn't all come in at once.

\* \* \*

Early in the morning of the first Saturday in May, we were picking the first break of the new crop. We worked methodically down the beds, and it was one of those days when we could see new mushrooms already visible, twenty-feet behind where we had just picked.

Randy lobbed a lump of dirt into my shirt pocket. “*Oops.*”

I then ripped Randy's shirt pocket half off.

“*Oops.*”

His pocket hung down like a flap. In return, Randy tore off my pocket.

“Say, you can't do that to my brother,” sneered Brian, Clint Eastwood-like, and cut the rest of Randy's pocket off with his knife.

Randy howled. “Hey, you fuckers!”

“Neatly, Brian,” I objected. “*Neatly.*”

“Neat?” challenged Brian. “You want neat—how about *this*.”

Brian grabbed Randy, now weak with hoots, and stuck his knife through the shoulder of Randy’s shirt, yanking the shirt and knife around, completely severing the sleeve and pulling it off his arm.

Randy yelled, “My ma’s gonna kill me. She just bought this shirt! My dad—he’s gonna kill me!”

I did the same with the other sleeve of Randy’s shirt, and we continued to cut Randy’s shirt apart in sections.

*“Ya goddamn mushroom picker.”*

Finally, Randy’s hairless torso was completely bare except for the collar, still buttoned at the neck.

“Hey, look! Randy’s a blue-collar worker.”

We laughed hysterically, and I was in mid-sentence, “What a *goddamn mushroom picker*—” when we noticed a fourth headlamp in our midst. It was Marie. Her eyes locked on mine, having heard the cursing.

“Are you boys getting anything done in here?” she asked pointedly.

I wanted to disappear—hoping she hadn’t heard me. But her eyes weren’t angry, or even hurt. They were scared. Urgent.

“Sure, Marie,” Brian said, embarrassed. “The mushrooms are growing almost as fast as we can pick them.”

“Boys, please work as hard as you can until four o’clock,” she said, the worry deepening in her face. “Carl should be back by then.”

Marie didn’t seem to notice that Randy was half-naked.

That was at ten o'clock in the morning, and we didn't see her for the rest of the day. We did as she asked and finished that mushroom house on time. Carl's truck had not yet returned, so we punched out and left.

We were looking forward to a night of drinking and carousing with friends, which our parents understood as "going to the movies" at the Casino Theater. But just around five-thirty, the phone rang. It was Marie, and her voice was shaking.

"Boys, I need your help," she pleaded. "The second break is coming in too fast. Carl—isn't here. Can you come back over? Please? We could lose everything."

We had never before been asked for such a favor. We never knew one could have a mushroom emergency.

Anxious as we were to fish our six-packs of Schaefer out of Devils Hole Creek, Brian and I wouldn't let Marie down. We jumped back into our work clothes, headed up Sterling Road, and met Randy, who had just arrived driving his father's new Buick.

"Lemme at them mushrooms," Randy drawled. "Lemme at 'em."

No one was in the office, so we donned our headgear, baskets, and knives, and entered the first mushroom house. The bed was overburdened with mushrooms, which had grown into clumps eight-inches high as the swiftly growing fungi climbed over each other in the perfect conditions that Marie had described weeks before. A single light glowed far down the third bed, and in the silence, we could hear the echoes of sobbing. It was Marie.

"Boys, quickly," she called out. "Come on. Get started."

Marie's eyes were red and her face wet with tears. Her nose was dripping, and she was beyond intense. "They've grown so fast, we'll never get ahead of it. There's nothing to do but

clear off the beds and dump them. If we don't, we'll lose the third and fourth breaks. Get your tubs. Just pick 'em and dump 'em out the door."

"Can't we salvage them later?" Brian asked.

"It would be more labor than it's worth. Hurry up, now."

We couldn't comprehend the idea of throwing away a bumper crop of perfectly good mushrooms. We'd never seen so many crowded together before. We got to work at the front of the house, feeling creepy at the eerie stop-motion sight of a white stadium riot.

"This looks like outer space, man," whispered Randy.

"Attack of the killer mushrooms," I tittered, but the buzz of humor fell flat. We felt sorry for Marie, crying up ahead there, little sobs escaping over a disaster brought on by perfect conditions. We knew little about the business, but we knew the Poretas were struggling. We settled down and did what she asked, pulling and tossing mushrooms as quickly as we could, not even cutting off the stumps. As we dumped tubs of perfect mushrooms out the window, I felt badly about the sheer waste. I thought about the money we were saving for our cars, our raises to \$3.25 an hour, and the thousands of dollars we were throwing onto the rising heap outside the end of the house. Marie picked like an expert, her body swaying in smooth motions, sniffing wetly as tears dripped across the light from her headgear.

In a couple of hours, we caught up to her.

"Where's Carl?" I asked. "He should be here."

Without breaking her stride, she mouth-breathed an answer.

"Carl died this morning."

We boys stood stunned. No one said a word for a long agonizing moment.

"Died?" squeaked Randy. "Carl?"

“Driving back. He had a heart attack on the road.”

I fought tears as I scrutinized Marie’s face. She continued picking. The three of us gawked helplessly at our grieving friend who was focused entirely on saving the business.

“Was he driving?” Brian asked.

“Yeah,” she sputtered softly. “The bastard. He left all this for me. Why? *Why now?*” she pleaded into the darkness. “Carl, why didn’t you take care of yourself?”

We traded glances and said no more as we continued picking near her. The mushroom house was silent. The news hit Randy the hardest. His eyes filled up. His lips curled in grief. The three of us doubled our speed, working faster than we’d ever worked before.

“He didn’t crash, thank God,” Marie exclaimed, as though we required the information. “He pulled off at a gas station near Allentown and died behind the wheel in the parking lot. He’s over at Taylor Funeral Home. I won’t be able to see him in the morning.” She said it as though they’d had an appointment. “I can’t. Not with this. So if you—if you can—help me out a little, I could—”

She turned her head and the lamp shone down the bed where we had just picked, and a carpet of new mushroom caps had already appeared.

“We’ll help you, Marie,” I said, my voice quivering. Brian and Randy echoed. “Don’t worry. We’ll help you all night if you need us.”

“You boys are wonderful.”

“I’m awful sorry about Carl,” squeaked Randy. “Like so real sorry.”

“Yeah,” Brian and I dittoed.

The three of us worked in silence, but Marie wanted to talk. No one felt compelled to answer as she switched from talking to us to talking to Carl, and sometimes to her grown daughters, who lived far away.

“Me and Carl—we met after the war at the Rink over in Mountainhome,” she said. “Carl didn’t have to go to war because he was agricultural. When I first met him, I thought he was a Roman god. The most beautiful man I’d ever seen, and me, I was busy. I was busy finding my way out of Slatington. I was headed to New York to be a secretary in one of the big skyscrapers there, not a farmer’s wife. *Uh-uh*. Not this kiddo. And I was popular, I don’t mind saying. I mean I could have dated anyone I wanted, and they called. They bothered me somethin’ awful. But Carl didn’t. He’d never before been to the Rink. Only that one time, the night I met him. And we never went there again, either. We had Darla eight months after we were married and Gracie a year later. And we built up the farm together, and we did good. Real good. And it’s been a good life.” Marie turned her light in Denny’s direction, her face vanishing in the corona of it. “We had a good life, til today.”

Marie continued picking and sniffing, committing her hands, arms, and shoulders to the record-breaking mushroom crop that she was losing just as surely as she had lost her husband that morning.

With a mighty sigh, she swiped the sleeve of her gray flannel shirt under her nose. She lifted her eyes toward heaven.

“And you left me with this—big—*damn* mess, Carl.”

Her voice broke, and Brian and Randy’s eyes were dripping. I had never seen grief up close since my grandfather or President Kennedy. I hurt deeply for Marie. But I would never cry. Tears would never wet *my* face. Never.

We called home to say we'd be picking all night, and we did until three in the morning, when exhaustion defeated us. We had dumped a fortune in mushrooms out the doors of the house, and yet the mushroom beds continued to grow. We laid down in the car, dirty and stinking, and slept until the rosy dawn. For breakfast, Marie fed us doughnuts and coffee, and we started right in again in the other houses, picking for most of that day, too, until the growth rate finally returned to normal.

Two weeks later, we finished picking the fourth break, and when the last wooden lid was slid onto the last three-pound basket, we knew it would be the final crop for Poretta's Mushroom Farm. After Carl's death, Marie had grown increasingly distant and disinterested in the mushroom business. On our last day, she barely showed her face, still sallow with the devastation of loss. She told us she had sold the farm to a developer, and was going to live with her daughter, Gracie, in St. Louis. Marie hugged each one of us against her pillowy chest, holding our faces with her calloused fingers, leathery against our cheeks. She thanked us and said goodbye as though it was her final goodbye to Carl and the life they had lived there since many years before Brian, Randy, and I were even born.