

We are standing in the rain, shivering. It is an early April day in Illinois, many years ago. For months I have been listening to my friend talk about “morels” as though nothing else on earth matters. A few hours ago I was snug as a bug in my warm house, drinking coffee and watching the rain through the windows.

But now I have donned boots and a coat, and plunged headfirst down what must be the steepest, slipperiest ravine in Illinois. I have walked for over an hour in the mud, splashing through creek beds, my feet getting more and more numb with each step. I am cold and hungry, and I have decided my new friend is insane. He is Captain Ahab with a walking stick—but instead of hunting the great white whale he is examining every cold, wet leaf on the forest floor in search of something I have never seen, something that looks in pictures rather like an ugly little shriveled brain.

We stop walking. There is an odd tension in the air. My friend’s head is tilted sideways, as though he is waiting for something. *He knows I’m about to say it, I think. He’s waiting for me to suggest that maybe there aren’t any of these “morels” here and maybe we should think about heading back to our nice, warm houses.* Raindrops tick methodically on the dead leaves around us. I wipe the water from my glasses. “John David,” I say, trying to think of a gentle way to suggest a retreat—and then I stop, speechless: there on a muddy embankment, a few feet away, are two black mushrooms glistening in the rain. I can tell they are morels from the many photos he has shown me, but the photos did not do them justice.

They are amazing, poking through the dead leaves like little rebels. Though I have been admiring the tiny wildflowers and buds that signal the onset of spring in an otherwise dreary woods, the mushrooms are more compelling. *Less dramatic, I think to myself. Earthier. Sturdy and fragile at the same time. Graceful and clumsy. Beautiful and ugly.* I am an English teacher and this—sadly, perhaps—is how English teachers think. Meanwhile, as more bad poetry rolls through my head, John David is waiting for me to say something. Aloud, all I can come up with is:

“Um, are *those* morels?”

He follows my gaze, then sighs deeply, as though he has just eaten the best meal of his life or finally come home after years on the road.

“Yes they are,” he says. “Yes, they are . . .”

Introduction:
Pig-Dog Gulch

Pig-Dog Gulch, we named that spot in later years, because a terrifyingly large and fearsome dog, one that looked an awful lot like a wild pig, confronted us loudly there one spring. We were afraid of the dog but more afraid of not getting to the morels we knew were only a few yards away; eventually the stare down was over and morel hunters were proven to be more territorial than even a wild pig-dog. The ravine is so steep that it might as well be named Pig-Dog Box Canyon (or simply Pig-Dog Hell), and there is no way to get to the mushrooms without climbing down one of the slopes.

In this gulch a friend of mine who had never found morels and, after an hour of fruitless searching, frankly didn't believe they could be found at all, crawled through twenty bloody feet of brambles on his hands and knees and suddenly screamed *I FOUND ONE!!!* with a cry that would have stopped the German army's assault on Poland. In another year John David and I stopped halfway down the ravine, eyes popping: hundreds of huge yellow morels were spread across the creek bottom, visible from 50 yards away.

And, because this is the way of things where morels are concerned, there have been countless hours crawling through Pig-Dog Gulch, searching in vain. Years have gone by without a single mushroom appearing. False morels have appeared to laugh at us. Pig-Dog Gulch finally was written off . . . but it still haunts my morel dreams. How does one forget a spot that has produced so many morels?

Last spring I stole back in secret. My mushroom buddies would have laughed at me had I suggested a trip to the now defunct Pig-Dog Gulch, so I clambered down the wet ravine alone, in the rain . . . and there they were. Two black morels, only a few feet away from where they were all those years ago. I am sure it is a rebirth. The glory days will return, and Pig-Dog Gulch will hold more morels than ever before. I won't know what to do with them all; I will be devising pulley systems to haul them out of the ravine.

I will lie down in the mud, surrounded by mushrooms, and giggle like a baby.