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## The Morel Mushroom

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The Morel Mushroom

by Justin Wedekind

(English 1101)

The Assignment: A descriptive narrative written in response to E.B. White's "Once More to the Lake" which recalls some traditional ceremony, ritual, or family custom, explaining its importance, origins, who takes part, how it is changed (or not), what does it add to the lives of those who observe it.

I awaken in the morning to muffled voices and the sharp clang of dishes being set out. I sit up and nudge my brother awake; he moans, mutters something incomprehensible and rolls away. Standing up and stretching, peering out the window, I notice the thin fog hanging over the pasture in front of the house. The dark shapes of cows can be seen wandering through the haze. I get dressed and walk out to the kitchen where my mom, dad, and grandpa are already seated at the big wooden table. My grandma is moving back and forth from the cupboards to the table, preparing our breakfast. My parents, brother and I had driven out the night before, a trip that has become one of many yearly excursions to my grandparents' farm in western Illinois. We come here every year, usually around Mother's Day, for a specific purpose—to hunt for the elusive morel mushroom.

Small and sponge-like, morel mushrooms are a much sought after and difficult to find delicacy this time of year. Every season there is an article in the local newspaper about some shopper in a nearby town paying an outrageous price for these mushrooms, sometimes as high as thirty dollars a pound. The high price comes from a combination of factors. First, with its sandy brown color, morels are not easy to see among the underbrush and dead wood in the forest. They also rarely grow in the same place twice, making the search always a challenge. A hot spot one year will be barren the next. Morels have further baffled their seekers by proving notoriously difficult to cultivate by hand. This means nearly every morel on the market or in homes has been handpicked by enthusiasts like us. "Why go through the trouble?" some may ask. The answer to this can only truly be understood after eating a freshly picked and fried morel.

After breakfast my brother, parents, and I get dressed to head out into the timber. The zips of jackets and the heavy, dull clunk of hiking boots fill the air. Our excitement is always clearly visible on my dad's face. Having hunted morels as a child and nearly every year since, he lives for this one weekend a year. The storm door clicks shut behind us as we set off across the barnyard towards the nearest tree line. The fog is beginning to clear and we can still see our breath in the chilly early-morning air. As we cross the dewy field, we briefly discuss the route we will take once we reach the timber. Always planned ahead of time, this route is never completely adhered to and depends entirely on where we find morels. Stepping carefully over the electric fence that surrounds the pasture, we walk up a slight hill and enter the trees. We pause for a moment to assess the area around us and then move right in. We begin scanning the forest floor for any signs of the elusive mushrooms. Kicking aside sticks and holding back plants, no part of the floor is overlooked. These are traditionally the most exciting minutes, right before the first mushrooms are found. Energy fills the air as each one of us tries to find the first morel of the day, an honored yearly title. Sticks and twigs break under my feet with wet pops and crunches as I walk half-hunched among the trees.

Suddenly a cheer from my dad's direction breaks the silence. I groan and make my way towards the sound of his voice. He is crouching low to the ground, smiling triumphantly, his hands cupped around the two-inch, light brown first morel of the day. We all take a look at its ruffled dome before he picks it, gently breaking the soft stem. We joke annually about "training our eyes" to see

the first one still in the ground. My dad holds his prize close to his face and takes a long, deep sniff. “Ahhhhhhhh!” The morels have a faint, earthy scent that conjures up memories of mushroom hunts in the past. He puts the mushroom into his small sack and we continue on, focusing our search near his find.

We continue on in this manner for hours, changing our path based on success or lack thereof. The sun is beginning to break through the trees, speckling the green undergrowth with light. We tie our jackets around our waists as the air warms around us. We hike up steep, wooded hills, jump over clear, gurgling streams, and dodge old, long forgotten, rusty fences. Our sacks nearly full and our stomachs nearly empty, we begin to make our way back to the farmhouse. We break the tree line and emerge onto a lumpy, brown field. My parents look around to get their bearings and we set off in the direction of home. We cross the field and come to a road that leads back to the farm. Our feet crunch on the gravel road as we march, mushroom sacks in tow, and discuss which piece of land we will scour next.

Upon returning to the house, we unload our sacks onto the kitchen counter and begin our count. We see who found the biggest morel, the most, the ugliest, and so on. After being thoroughly scrutinized and counted, the morels are cut in half lengthwise, the stems are cut off, and the halves soaked in salt water. This salt water bath forces any hidden bugs out of the many nooks in the morels and also cleans most of the dirt out of these tiny holes. Once the soak is complete, my grandma dips the mushrooms in an egg batter and rolls them in cracker crumbs. Then she fries them in a skillet. The finished product looks like a floppy, thin, greasy, golden brown chicken nugget. One bite into a cooked morel, however, reveals its slick, soft texture which, along with the crunch of the crackers, is tantalizing. My dad hovers over his mother’s shoulder as she cooks, repeatedly reaching a hand in to grab the freshest of the morels from the skillet. As I watch his quickly withdrawn hand narrowly dodge the flying spatula, I bite into a less risky morel from the plate on the table. I lean back in my chair as I enjoy the hot, juicy, crunchy morel. This enjoyment of a weekend on the farm, a walk in the woods, and delicious mushrooms are what keep my family and me coming back to go “shrooming” year after year. Once more, next May, we’ll return to do it all over again.