

The Mycologist
Heather Beiert

The mycologist was the solitary type, used to and pleased by her own company. It worked well then, the days and weeks that she'd spend alone, camping in various forests round the world, cataloguing mushrooms.

Today was no different.

Trousers sodden and damp, Dr Callaghan kneels in the dirt, carefully cutting free samples. Turning the mushroom, she checks that the cap, gills, stem and base are all intact before wrapping it away in a small section of wax paper. *Agrocybe rivulosa*. *Baudionia caledoniensis*. *Caloscypha fulgens*. The names roll off her tongue, a mantra, a purpose of will.

They lead her away from the forest path, herding her further and further into the shadowed realms where the trees are at their thickest, and the canopy threatens to blot out the sunlight altogether. Only when the silence crushes itself against her, does she startle, realizing how she is lost. The trees as she stares at them, turning every which way, refuse to show her the way back, leafy branches shielding the path. Her heart stutters in her chest, the space between beats shortening until the muscle presses against her ribcage, kissing the bone, burning a red and pink tattoo against her flesh. Tucking the small pocket knife and trowel back into her backpack, she heads eastwards. The hair at her nape prickling. Callaghan's an experienced hiker, more at home in nature than anywhere else, but her panic is growing. Her skin tingles in warning, and her nerves lacking the nuance of language cannot advise her of the danger that awaits. It's an uncomfortable tactile sensation, as if she is being watched. She walks until dusk, until her calves are cramping, and her toes are stiff. Tears prick at her eyes as she finds a space clear of nettles and thorns, and sits, ripping her feet free from the confines of her boots. With the exception of one rare incident during her childhood Dr Callaghan has never been lost before, never truly felt that helpless bite of desperation. Scrubbing at her wet cheeks she groans, brow furrowing as she spots something in the dark. No more than a few feet away half hidden in shadow, and yet despite the lack of light, the moss and the fallen leaves blanketing it, there's something familiar about the shape.

She pulls her boots back on with a wince and hobbles over, kneeling in the overgrowth, noticing for the first time the *Xylaria hypoxylon*. A common fungus, known for its distinctive shape. Small thin white strands that grow heavenward, as if in proclamation. With the sleeve of her coat she brushes against the loose bits of soil and bracken around the fungus, revealing a nightmare.

Her screams make the very branches tremble and if she were listening closely, she'd hear the accompanying, collective groan of the forest. The whimper of the trees as they shift, as if shying away. The crinkle of the leaves as they shudder and the deep hum of the surrounding roots as the plants whisper amongst themselves.

Dr Callaghan sits in the hospital waiting room, on her own, head between her knees. With no clock on the wall, and her phone battery long dead, it's hard to know exactly how long she's been there. No one in all that time comes to check on her. She passed out upon seeing the body, felt herself crumple, and distantly, the tearing of the thorns and thistles as she landed in their midst, becoming swallowed up by the vegetation.

Fiction

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They found her at some point, though she can't be certain when, and brought her here. For questioning, she reasons, though that doesn't quite sit right. No one's approached her, neither the passing medical workers or the police officers as they rush around. So she waits.

Hours later a sound startles Callaghan from her near doze, jostling her awake. She looks up to see a police officer, the brief flash of his badge attached to his belt, giving him away. He glances at the clipboard in his hands before looking up, meeting her gaze. Silently his lips part for a moment as their eyes lock, abruptly he turns on his heel, striding away and down the nearest corridor.

Frustration becomes anger and so Callaghan shoots up from her chair, racing after him. "Excuse me!" She shouts, cringing a little at her discernible desperation. He doesn't turn, ignoring her as he pushes his way through a set of double doors. She huffs after him, ripping the door back and stomping over the threshold.

"Oi, I'm talking to y-"

Her stomach drops.

She's followed him into the morgue, somehow having missed all the signs, and the smell is an assault. He turns, his blue eyes narrowing, the deep frown between his dark brows sharpening his face. Hooking a finger around the golden chain adorning her neck, she opens her mouth to apologise but is cut off as a short middle aged woman enters the room from another door.

"Hi Dean, wondered when you'd get here. I only have a few minutes 'till my shift is over, so let's get this done quickly." Snapping on a pair of gloves, she leans over one of the three autopsy tables, unzipping the bag with hurried movements.

Callaghan lets out a squeak, reeling back and banging into the door.

The police officer, Dean, turns back to the medical examiner. "Not a problem Pat, I just need to make a quick ID so we can contact her next of kin."

Although every nerve in Dr Callaghan's body is humming in warning, something stills her, forcing her to watch as the face is revealed.

A face of two halves. The one closest to Callaghan has been claimed by nature in all its destructive but admittedly ambivalent beauty. Insects have nibbled away at the flesh, if not larger beasts, and fungus and moss have overtaken, replacing flesh. The eye socket has been emptied, three chestnut mushroom caps filling the space. Despite that, it is the other side of the face that is truly horrifying.

The skin is without blemish, pale and waxen. The golden hair is brushed back, the arched eyebrows and eyelashes a shade darker. Her lips, devoid of colour, are pulled up into a macabre smile.

This face she knows.

"Yeah, that looks like who we figured it was." Dean flips a page on his clipboard. "Dr Felicity Callaghan," he reads.

Dean Schultz was sweating, his skin clammy and pallid when he returned to the office. He hadn't seen what he's seen, or indeed, heard what he had heard. He couldn't have. Chalking it up to stress induced reaction, some lingering mental malignancy, he fingers the chain in his pocket and pushes her from his mind. Refusing to dwell on it and pushes her from his mind. Not here. Not now.

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"I was about to give Felicity Callaghan's family a call Dean." Sergeant David Johnson calls, sitting at the desk in his small office, in lieu of a greeting.

Closing the distance, Dean leans against the doorframe, plastering a small smile across his face. "Nah boss, I'll do it right now. It's my case." He forces his smile up a degree, hesitating.

David hums, "sure, do it straight away. The medical examiner sure it was an accident? That's the third hiker in the last couple of months."

Dean nods, throat bobbing, "pretty sure. Pat needs to do a full autopsy yet, but her neck was broken, probably from tripping and falling down."

"Alright, well keep me updated."

Thoroughly dismissed, Dean makes his way back over to his desk, staring blankly at his computer screen for a moment.

He slips up within hours.

Not knowing what else to do, and inexplicably drawn to him, Felicity follows him to work. Not understanding how, but somehow knowing that, unlike before, she is now not visible. Occupying a corner in the office, she watches as he calls her mother and breaks the news. His cold detachment makes her frown.

Will her mother miss her? They've never been close. She'd always thought Felicity to be odd, even as a small child, and when her oddness following her into adulthood, and awkwardness had taken root between them. They spoke briefly on the phone every couple of months, exchanged emails when that wasn't possible because of Callaghan's travelling, but there had never been any real warmth between the pair, no love. As for her father, Callaghan knew his name and little else. Her mother had not been willing to share any more information than that. It was depressing to realise how utterly alone she had been in life. There would be a funeral she assumed, but just who would turn up? Who would be there to cry?

Stubbornly clinging to her composure Felicity watches as the detective goes about the rest of the day. Frowning as he works on his computer, his day broken up by the occasional bathroom break and a questionable lunch at his desk. But despite the tedium, she feels unable to leave him, thinking that at the hospital at least, he had seen her.

When the other officers file out, shutting down their computers and leaving for home, he lingers. When he and Dr Callaghan are the only one left, he opens up a file on his desk, peering at a photograph with a look on his face that sends a shiver down Felicity's spine. Moving closer, she peers over his shoulder, reeling back when her own face stares back.

Pulling something from his pocket, he presses it against her picture, his breathing becoming heavy. Gold glints between his fingers, as if desperately seeking her out, as his other hand fumbles with the buttons of his trouser. Felicity watches aghast as he pulls his trousers and then pants down in order to free himself. Needing both hands, he abandons the shiny thing on the desk for a moment. A fine golden chain, identical to the one around her neck.

The memories overtake her, filling her mind, eviscerating her present self.

She'd been digging, lost in cataloguing the species, when she heard him approach.

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Still kneeling, she'd smiled as he'd introduced himself, noting with surprise how handsome he was. He'd sat down next to her as they shared a cereal bar and a homemade trail mix. He'd listened as she'd waxed lyrical over the home fungus species she'd found, his smile bright at her enthusiasm. Realising that she was losing daylight, she'd make excuses, collected her rubbish and turned to leave. He'd struck then.

Grabbed her around the throat, and dragged her off the path, far away from prying eyes.

When Felicity comes to, and the memories cease, she is back in the forest. Transported somehow. She feels different, as if her tenuous connection with life is waning, and though it is an alien feeling, it is not entirely unwelcome.

She feels without seeing the difference in her form. The comforting weight of the mushrooms in her eye socket and the soft pressure of the growing moss on her skin. It doesn't disgust her. She doesn't shrink from it, in part because of what is happening around her.

The forest floor rolls beneath her feet, the trees stretching out towards her. The birds and the insects are creating a cacophony of noise, welcoming her to her new home.

Abandoning the boots she no longer has a use for, she sinks her toils into the soil, her pale skin browning before her eyes, tendrils of greenery climbing up her ankles. There is an unexpected warmth that fills her to the brim; irrevocably changing her, freeing her from the bounds of a solitary, mortal existence.

Welcome home, the forest sings.

On a sigh, she sinks to her knees and presses a kiss to the earth. *Thank you for having me.*

We'll get him together, the next time he comes. The forest promises, the surrounding thistles growing, trembling with menace.

Dr Felicity Callaghan smiles and the expression is sinister.

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