

Mushrooms

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I worked at a newspaper in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and met René, the community organizer, on a story. She had this steady way about her—calm, reserved, and curious, often thinking, rarely speaking. When she did, it would be about the originality of Jane Jacobs, or how Habitat for Humanity never built in rich neighborhoods.

It was important to know everyone by their first name, she said. Wherever you walked, you should look someone in the eye and say, “Hi, Jim, how’s the garden?” Then your neighborhood is your home and not just a place you lived.

She had a weird idea of freedom. She wanted us to attend a women-only outdoor retreat. When we arrived, we camped under trees, with the earth so rich, and the sounds of crickets and animals I did not know. No one wore shirts or bras. It was supposed to be liberating. This troubled me. All these boobs swinging around, women hugging all the time. René wanted to hug a lot.

Then there was this one woman with one breast, and she walked like a lion, not hugging anyone, just fierce and moving along the Serengeti of her heart.

After that, René wanted to do mushrooms. Her partner, Terry, would stay with a friend nearby. Since I was spending the night, I thought it was safe.

She stirred the shriveled mushrooms into ice cream, and we watched Public Television, waiting for something to happen. Nothing did. Not the first ten minutes, or the next, or the next.

Then we ended up watching, of all things, Garrison Keillor's *A Prairie Home Companion*. We giggled at first. That dude's weird, René said. Our giggles turned to aching howls, the way every charming thing he said looked like Beelzebub got his own show. Couldn't people see what this was? We called her boyfriend, crying in laughter. He couldn't make out the words. René had to repeat them three times, until he said, "I'm so glad Garrison Keillor is the devil?"

It was all silly, nothing, I thought. I lost track of René. I wanted to ask what she would make of this: how I would move to Minnesota five years later, how I would see Keillor in person at a live *A Prairie Home Companion* show, how my sister would be the one to lose a breast, and how my trying to help her live would put me into a great depression; how after she died, after they all died, the shock of my life came when a trapdoor opened, and I fell through the floor, and landed there, surrounded by the smell of earth and mushrooms and a new version of my life with things otherwise unseen. New flowers, rabbit cabbage, an old woman who looked familiar. Who but René would understand seeing my sister, long dead, across the street one day, her exact face and shape walking a dog the other way, and looking at me? Her mouth tight and her almond eyes narrowed against the cold. Without moving her mouth, she called my name and said, finally, you see, not the devil, but the world that had been calling all along.

