

## MAYNARD SMITH AND THE INVISIBLE MAN

*By Dan Armstrong*

Two men were setting posts for livestock fencing at the back of a small valley in western Oregon. They'd been at it for six hours now, and it had been raining steadily the entire time. One of the men, Maynard Smith, was at the wheel of a tractor. The other, Maynard's hired hand Tim, stood at the top of a slight hill where they wanted to drill the next posthole. Attached to the back of the tractor was a lightweight drilling rig that could cut through the wet ground as though it were tub margarine. Maynard had to maneuver the tractor in reverse up the grade to set the drill. It was a short climb, no more than twenty yards, but it was muddy and slick, and he'd failed at it once already.

Maynard gave the John Deere a little gas and went at it from some distance off, trying to hit the hill with some momentum. As soon as he reached the grade, the tires began to rip and tear at the sod. The green and yellow tractor bucked and slid this way and that, throwing chunks of grass and mud all over Tim, who was trying to direct Maynard into position. With a lot of effort and even more spent diesel, Maynard inched to the brink of the hill. The tractor held a few moments, then slid slowly back down the grade.

After another attempt with the same result, Maynard let the tractor come to rest at the bottom of the slope. He cut the growling motor. It answered with a backfire and a puff of smoke. Tim slipped down the grade and tramped over to the tractor. Maynard climbed out of the rig and stood next to his hired hand. Both were wearing full suits of olive green raingear and black rubber boots with red neoprene soles. Both were soaked inside and out. For several minutes, neither of them said a word.

Of the two, the hired hand, his hood cinched tight around his face, looked the worse. He was

spattered from head to toe with field muck. With a black Oregon State Beavers ball cap pulled down tight on his head, Maynard just looked fiercely determined. His silence was a building one. Tim attempted a few words of solace. “At least it ain’t cold like it could be, Maynard.”

Maynard wiped his face with a soaking wet, red paisley handkerchief and stared hard at the other man, saying nothing because he didn’t want to curse. He had lived on this farm since he was ten, when his family moved out from the dust bowl forty-four years ago. His baby sister died during the move, his mother sixteen years later. He and his father hung on to homestead five hundred acres out of the raw Oregon wilderness. Only in the last few years did Maynard feel that the job was near complete. It seemed so bitterly ironic at times like these when it rained for weeks on end. The old place in Kansas had fallen victim to dust storms. His father, who died eight years back, had decided on this part of the country because of the certainty of rain.

Maynard couldn’t really complain though. With several hundred sheep, a sizable herd of dairy cows, a big hen house, and a little dairy that his daughter and her husband ran, Maynard’s job was primarily maintenance. But it wasn’t easy. He worked a lot harder than most and got less for it.

The sternness of the life made him tough, stubborn, and religious in the way a lot of farmers are. He wasn’t one to read the Bible and he rarely mentioned the word of Christ. His belief was just a quiet code of honesty and faith in the land. His satisfaction came from day-to-day progress on the farm. It was a simple, good life, and most of his problems were like the one before him now.

“Maybe we got a chance here,” Maynard said after a few minutes of silence. Sometimes it seemed that he spoke as little as possible. “Take the end of the tow line up there and wrap it good around that fat Doug fir.”

Pretty soon Maynard had put his scheme together. It was something he’d done before. A winch on the back of the tractor powered the drill and was fitted with a reel of metal cable and a hook. Tim anchored the cable to the fir tree, and Maynard used the winch in conjunction with the tractor engine to get the vehicle up the slope.

It took some doing, but Maynard got the tractor to the top of the hill. Tim secured it with the cable and freed up the winch to use the drill. The first time they tried lowering the drill, the tractor bucked left, then right, broke the cable loose and slid down the hill half-sideways. They were at it again immediately. The second time the drill bit into the wet ground. Two minutes

later, the hole was done. They unhitched the cable and Maynard let the tractor slide down the hill. Hard or easy, this was the way everything was done on the farm—one muddy step at a time.

Because Maynard wanted these fences to last, he was using some big posts he'd cut from the forest and prepared with creosote. When the posts were wet—like today—it took both men to lift one and drop it into place. Maynard struggled, slipping and sliding, back up the grade to help with the post.

By the time Maynard reached the hole, Tim was watching it fill with water. He waited for Maynard to fully appreciate this. “You know, Maynard, this rain holds up much longer, we'll be wastin' our time with these posts.”

Maynard didn't say anything. After working in this climate all his life, he hated to stop because of the rain. He'd invariably go at it until it sucked him in up to the armpits, then he'd pull himself out with a come-along and spend the next couple of days in the barn working on machinery. He looked down the forest line where there were some two hundred more posts to set. He sensed that Tim wanted to take a break, at least until the rain let up. But Maynard had no intention of stopping now. Another week or so and they'd be done for the winter. Every day they delayed, it was only that much more likely to rain the next. He took his position on the post and Tim did the same. They strained to lift it, then dropped it into the hole, forcing out the water with a thick sucking sound. Nothing else was said about the weather.

After the post was packed with gravel and set snugly in place, the two men slipped down the hill to the tractor, preparing to move on to the next posthole. Before Maynard climbed onto the tractor, Tim spoke up. “Hate to say it, Maynard, but I saw somebody in that field by the bog yesterday.”

Maynard's eyes narrowed with a distant anger then fixed on the hired hand's face. Tim nodded his head to the understood question. Maynard stared off into the shifting curtains of rain. “Goddamn it.” Maynard did not like to use the Lord's name in vain, but he did with this news.

“Check 'em out,” said a rather shady looking, thirty-year-old Jamie Reeves, reaching into the side pocket of his black vest to retrieve a clear plastic baggie. “Fresh ones like these go for twenty-five bucks a hundred or three for a dollar.”

A hip young couple from the university sat across from him in a booth at the rear of a little backstreet tavern in Eugene. The boy wore a flannel shirt and blue jeans. The girl had jeans on as

well, with a loose white peasant blouse and, very obviously, no bra.

Jamie wore all black. A long, sun-streaked ponytail trailed down his back and a silver Egyptian cross dangled from his left earlobe. He turned the baggie upside down over the table. A glistening heap of fresh psilocybin mushrooms, maybe fifty, none larger than the tip of his little finger, piled out onto the table like root beer colored gum drops. They might have been gold nuggets for the way the young couple's eyes widened. They had never tried or even seen the legendary "magic" mushrooms before. Both of them selected one from the pile and inspected it beneath the booth's dim yellow wall light. The little brown liberty cap mushrooms, native to the northwest, were translucent like gelatin with a tiny transparent nipple on top.

"The hallucinogenic mushroom is sacred to many cultures," said Jamie, stroking his mustache down around the corners of his mouth.

A street poet and song writer, he made his living peddling marijuana and cocaine to the University of Oregon college crowd. The mushrooms happened to be in season now and were a personal favorite. He was out making the rounds of the college bars tonight, hoping to make some quick cash. He'd been nibbling on the mushrooms all day and was quite stoned. "I like to think of them as the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge," he pronounced with drama. "You know, the knowledge of good and evil." He raised a single eyebrow.

The young woman was cute and blonde, probably from California. She held a mushroom daintily by its thin stem. She had no idea what Jamie was talking about.

He glowered red-eyed at her like a being from another planet. "It's a physical high. Like Ecstasy. But it's organic."

The girl sniffed at the mushroom and made a face. "Smells like dirt." She dropped the musky fungus back into the pile as though it might have been a live scorpion.

"How many you take to get high?" asked the young man, all business, paying no mind to Jamie's banter.

"Fresh like this, five will work. Ten is better. Twenty—who knows?" Jamie winked at the woman. "I have to laugh whenever I do this," he chuckled "It's not like selling marijuana or cocaine. They're just drugs." He lowered his voice. "These little babies have been eaten as a way to see God for as long as man has been on the planet. They're the real thing. Soma. Mescalito. Magic." He hissed in a whisper, then laughed—a little too loud.

The girl didn't like it. "Then maybe you shouldn't be selling them. Maybe it's bad karma."

“You mean, like I should be giving them away?” Jamie laughed. “I don’t think so.”

The young man wasn’t listening to any of this. “How much for all of these?”

Jamie took his eyes off the woman. He scooped up half the mushrooms and let them fall through his fingers like Thompson raisins. “The season’s just peaking. These are prime ‘shrooms. How about fifteen bucks?”

The young man looked at his girlfriend. She shrugged. “I’ll take ’em.” He pulled out his wallet and found a five and a ten as Jamie put the mushrooms back in the plastic bag.

“Where do you pick these things?” asked the young woman as the exchange of money was made.

“It’s a secret.” Jamie grinned. “Told only to very close friends.”

The young man gave Jamie a dirty look. “We better get going.” He stood up. The woman did the same.

“Happy trails,” Jamie glimmered as the couple wandered off with their score. He had three hundred more to sell. Halloween was near and the mushrooms were going like hotcakes. He’d been driving out to the cow pastures west of town every other day, picking five hundred to a thousand per trip, then coming back to campus and selling them all.

Maynard Smith had spent the first half of the day in another valley well away from his house, setting those same fence posts. He and Tim had been doing this for six days straight. The rain had let up and they’d made good progress. The job might be done in a couple days if the weather held.

Maynard was feeling quite satisfied as he drove his pickup back to the house for lunch. Tim had gone the other way to town to eat and pick up some supplies. Maynard smiled to himself as he drove. The farm was nearly ready for winter.

As he entered the valley from the west, he noticed a black VW bug parked off the road beside one of his pastures. He slowed his pickup as he passed the VW on the way to his driveway. The muscles in his jaw gradually tightened as he scanned the adjacent pasture. There he was, on his hands and knees, picking things from the ground and putting them into a plastic bag.

“Goddamned mushrooms,” Maynard cursed through his teeth. But he didn’t stop to interfere with the long-haired man in the field. He was too angry. Yeah, he had a temper, and it scared

him sometimes. He was so incensed right now he didn't even stop at the mailbox. Instead he mumbled to himself all the way up the long gravel driveway to the house.

It began five years ago. One Saturday afternoon he came home to find three cars parked along the road next to this one particular pasture. Ten or so long-haired kids were in the field crawling around on their hands and knees. He'd confronted them with relative calm, and they'd explained starry-eyed that they were picking magic mushrooms. All he said was "if you get sick don't come complaining to me."

He didn't kick them out that day, but he should have. The following week he spent half a day repairing fences damaged by the intruders.

Two days later the kids were in the field again. He left them alone this time, but the next morning he posted the field's fence line with *Absolutely No Trespassing* signs.

At first he didn't understand why these kids were picking the mushrooms, but he soon learned that other farmers were having the same problem and that the mushrooms were psycho-activating—whatever that meant—and illegal.

Maynard waged a silent war with the pickers over the next two years. Each fall about the end of October, when the leaves turned and the rain began, the mushrooms would bloom. And each fall there were kids in his fields disregarding his signs, hopping his fences, looking for free drugs. It drove him to the edge. He was tempted to call the police, but he hated bringing in the law. It was his land. He was responsible for protecting it, not somebody else. Yet his response to the pickers had become so emotional, he was afraid to confront them for fear of doing something he might regret. Instead, he resorted to all manner of indirect tactics to get them off his property.

One time he broke out his shotgun and fired it a few times into the air from his porch. That scared them off. Another time he got in his truck and drove back and forth next to the pasture until the pickers finally got the message and scampered away. But the best solution came from another farmer. Don't graze cows in the pasture, he told Maynard. The mushrooms become less abundant because of the lack of fresh fertilizer, and the few mushrooms that do come up become harder and harder to find because the pasture grass isn't grazed.

Maynard pulled his cows from the pasture the next two years. The field grew wild. A few pickers came that first fall. None the second. He figured he'd licked the problem, so this summer, he let the cattle back into the pasture, just so nature didn't get too far out of hand and take the

pasture back from him. But sure as the rain falls, with the grass grazed low and the regular dropping of manure, the cows recultivated the mushrooms. They came back in full bloom and so did this one picker, again and again.

Maynard was hot when he entered the house for lunch. “Damn it, Ann, that kid’s out there again.” The door bounced on its hinges behind his slam. “I’ve been pretty Goddamn lenient up to now—but this time,” he gritted his teeth and angrily pondered the various measures he might take. “I don’t know. Maybe I’ll call the state police.”

Out in the dining room, seated at the table, was the silent half of this conversation, Ann Smith, his wife of twenty-eight years. There was nothing anyone could say when Maynard was wound up like this. That he was cursing was the giveaway. He wasn’t a regular at the local church, but without much show, he tried to live by the Ten Commandments. It was only at times like these when his usually bridled temper broke that he’d begin to curse.

His lunch sat on a plate across the table from Ann. “Come on in here, Maynard,” she called to him. “Have something to eat.”

Maynard didn’t seem to hear her. He paced back and forth across the living room, entirely distracted by the thought of the picker. Finally he came to a stop before the big picture window that overlooked the field. Though it was some distance off, he could still see the picker as he popped in and out of sight. He muttered another curse then went into the dining room.

Lunch passed in a seething silence. Afterward, when Maynard headed back down the driveway to meet Tim across the valley, he noticed that the black VW had left and the picker was gone. This relaxed him. By the end of the day he’d forgotten all about it.

Jamie Reeves had picked the magic mushrooms for several years. Each new season, as fall pressed into the rainy season, he would patrol the fields waiting for their bloom. Because of the money to be made, there was competition between veteran pickers. The fields where the mushrooms flourished, which might be one in twenty western Oregon cow pastures, were tightly kept secrets. Jamie’s particular success this season resulted from his finding a field he had never harvested before. And by his third visit, it was clear that no one else knew about it either. With no competition, his only concerns were keeping the field secret and avoiding the owner of the field, who’d plainly posted the property—*Absolutely No Trespassing*. Every third day, as the

weather allowed, Jamie would head out to his “new claim” and pick for an hour or two, then move on to lesser fields as the day wore on.

This new field was twenty miles directly north from Eugene on the Interstate, then another thirty-two miles directly west on Route 64. The rural two-lane road rose and fell through several valleys as it wound through Oregon’s coastal mountain range. As one neared the site, the highway climbed a steep hill then dropped slowly into a long thin valley. Indistinguishable from many such valleys in western Oregon, it had a few worn farm buildings at the east end and one modest residence set back on a hill midway through. The “M. Smith” mailbox at the bottom of the driveway marked Jamie’s treasured field.

Jamie assumed that the owner of the field lived in that solitary house and, because of all the *No Trespassing* signs, that he must be aware that the mushrooms were growing on his property. In five visits, Jamie had also noticed a certain beige pickup that stopped at the “M. Smith” mailbox about noon each day, then turned up the driveway to the house at the top of the hill. The driveway passed directly along the east edge of the pasture. Jamie made every attempt to be on the west side of the pasture when noon approached, and to be as invisible in his operation as possible. In his mind, etiquette was everything.

Whenever Jamie came to pick, he drove the length of the valley, past the field, to apprehend the scene. If there was anything going on, men at work or a new picker, he’d just continue out the west end of the valley and head to some other field. He could come back another day. Etiquette was everything.

On the first pass of Jamie’s sixth visit the field was empty, as it always had been. When he reached the far end of the valley, he parked his car off the road, not quite so close to the pasture as he had before, and walked the mile and a half back to the field. Standing alongside the fence, Jamie took a quick look up and down the highway, then slipped between the strands of barbwire. He moved to the back of the field, away from the road, and began his methodical combing harvest. He wore a green fleece jacket and black jeans to blend in with the field. He kept low and alert, moving from one patch of tall marsh grass to another, eyes on the ground.

Jamie didn’t want to be seen at all, by anybody. It was just as important to be invisible to the farmer as it was to others passing on Route 64, whether the state police or potential competitors. The presence of one picker in a field, especially on a weekend, could often lead to a great

number of passersby stopping to join in. Jamie wanted to avoid this, for his own precaution and profit. For the next two hours, he crept slowly through the back edge of the field and stilled at the sound of any approaching vehicle on the road.

The liberty cap mushroom was very small and hard to detect in the grass. An inexperienced hunter could pass through a field in full bloom without noticing a single one. Experienced pickers try to map the growing pattern unique to each field. The underground root system, the mycelium or tree of the mushroom, would generally extend through the entire pasture, and from one day to the next, depending on how wet it was, either higher or lower areas of the field would produce the most fruit.

Jamie had his own theory. He always ate the first five mushrooms he found. He felt that with their high his eyes became attuned to the colors of the field. The tiny mushrooms stood out and were easier to find. It also helped in his melding with the field. It was easier to get into the role of being invisible when he was stoned. He stuck to this procedure today and ate five mushrooms right away.

A little after noon, Jamie recognized the drone of M. Smith's approaching pick-up long before he saw it. He ducked behind a tall clump of marsh grass and was well out of view when the old Dodge stopped at the mailbox and turned in the driveway. Once the truck began to ascend the hill, Jamie returned to his picking.

When Maynard reached the top of the driveway, he cut the Dodge's engine and climbed from the cab. He started toward the house, then turned and gazed out over the valley. All the land as far as he could see was his. He'd made it his life to wrest it from the surrounding press of the wild. Every day he held it, its value went up. At three thousand dollars an acre, he was almost twice a millionaire. This amounted to his wages for all the hours of labor in his life. As an hourly rate, it didn't amount to all that much, but the farm was his and his alone—and that was what mattered.

Maynard turned his gaze to the lowest, wettest part of the valley, about two acres of thick marsh and about three of very wet, partially submerged pasture. This five-acre parcel of land held more than a mushroom history for Maynard. It spoke of the difference between his father's way of thinking and his own.

Forty plus years ago, when they were first laying out the farm, his father had found several Native American artifacts on that low-lying piece. He came to believe that it had been some kind

of sacred site or burial ground for the Kalapuya tribe that had lived on this land long before the Smiths had claimed it. Out of deference to this ceremonial site, Maynard's father had decided to leave this little parcel, out of all their five hundred acres, alone. He never felled a tree, never tried to till.

Maynard didn't try to convince his father otherwise, but he was not of the same mind. Maynard thought of that single spot of uncultivated land as a blemish, a symbol of superstition and irrationality. Less than a year after his father's death, Maynard cleared the five acres and tilled it all. As it turned out, about half the parcel was too low to use. It flooded every year and proved to be a perpetual swamp. The other half made for good pasture most of the year, but was really too wet the rest. That the mushrooms should come to bloom in this particular pasture only added to the peculiar feelings Maynard had about it.

Despite his decided turn to cold rationality and simple faith, he was often visited by strange thoughts about this low-lying pasture. More than once he'd dreamed that the parcel had, in fact, been an ancient tribal burial ground and that the mushrooms were the sprouted eyes of the Kalapuya buried there. Images of painted primitives, dancing naked, holding mysterious mushroom rites, haunted him off and on through the years like a deep racial memory. It made him superstitious in a way he didn't like, and against all his better judgment, he often wondered if there weren't something amiss in his beautiful valley.

Maynard had fought the elements all his life. No task had been so hard it couldn't be done. He'd used his brain. He'd used his brawn. Only to the Will of God and the Fire of the Glory did he bow. But there's a wrinkle in every mind out there, and in the case of Maynard Smith, his wrinkle was this piece of ground.

This little wrinkle was also part of the reason he'd never called in the police or interfered directly with the pickers—aside from posting the field. He'd even overdone that one year, putting up so many signs he'd all but marked the field as the one with the proper fungi. He didn't quite understand it, but something about that marsh and the time of year and the mushrooms made him especially thoughtful in a way he usually wasn't.

Gazing down at this lowest piece of land in the valley, Maynard chanced to spot the mushroom picker moving slowly across the far west edge of the pasture. His heart rate began to climb. His jaw clenched. His eyes darted to the shotgun in his pickup. He struggled mightily not to get it out.

Jamie suddenly sensed that he was being watched. He peeked up from his crouch to see the farmer standing by his truck, looking down on him from the hill. Jamie stopped moving, but kept his eyes on the man, waiting to see what the man was going to do. Jamie imagined for a moment that his eyes, at this impossible distance, two hundred yards or more, had caught the eyes of the man above and that a communication had passed from the farmer to him. The overriding message was disdain. The farmer knew exactly what he was doing. Picking the magic mushrooms and selling them for profit. Jamie went from feeling invisible to feeling naked.

Jamie felt so much guilt about what he was doing that he considered going up to the house to ask the farmer for permission to be there. But he was too high for that. Besides, the man was turning away now and heading into the house. Jamie decided he'd better leave before the man finished his lunch. He picked ten more mushrooms, then began to work his way out of the field.

Ann heard the front door open and close. She was in the kitchen making lunch. She stepped away from the counter so she could see out into the living room.

“Hi, Honey,” Maynard said, shedding his work jacket.

“You see that young man down there in the field?” Ann asked warily.

“Don't remind me.” He shook his head with frustration as he entered deeper into the house.

Ann came into the dining room with a plate in each hand. A glass of milk was already at Maynard's place. “I wonder what it is about them mushrooms that makes the kids come out here like they do?”

Maynard didn't answer Ann's question, mostly because he didn't want to use profanities. He turned to look out the living room window toward the pasture. He couldn't see the picker. Even though Maynard was certain the man must still be out there, it was easier to take when the picker was out of sight and stayed out of sight. He could seem fairly harmless out there alone. But when there were five or ten of them out there, he was likely to blow his stack and shoot them all. No fences could last a season of thoughtless mushroom pickers—and it only took one to get that started.

Maynard drifted into the dining room and sat down, entirely forgetting that his wife had asked him a question.

When Ann slid a plate with a sandwich in front of him, she asked again, “Why would anyone

want to eat something that grew in cow manure? That's what gets me. I mean, that's stooping pretty low to get high." She smiled at her own words. "How could it be worth it, Maynard?"

Maynard looked down mercifully at his sandwich. He decided again not to use profanity. He knew if he began to speak on this subject, which of late had also been nagging him, he'd never get to his lunch. So he calmed himself and said, "Haven't a clue, Ann." Then he whispered a word of thanks to the Lord and bit into his meatloaf sandwich.

Ann sat down across from him. "Do you think it could be like drinking alcohol? And getting drunk?"

"Got me." Maynard chewed a second mouthful of sandwich.

"This does puzzle me, Maynard," she said with mock exasperation. "They say it's like smoking pot or taking tablets of L-S-D. Could that be? Could we be growing L-S-D right out there in our cow pasture?" What she'd asked quieted her for a moment.

Maynard looked up from his sandwich. He gazed at his wife, then took another bite, nearly finishing off the first half of the sandwich. When he'd fully chewed this mouthful and washed it down with a drink of his own cow's milk, he responded. "You know, Ann, you just might have answered your own question."

"How's that Maynard?"

Maynard realized his anger was gone. It had just eased out of him. He even felt a smile trying to twist his old face out of its perpetual emotionless mask. "Ann," he said, "those mushrooms are probably just like L-S-D."

Ann thought a minute. "What's L-S-D like?"

Two days later Jamie woke up in a college dorm room. A young woman was beside him in the bed. She'd bought some coke from him the night before, and he had turned the deal into some action. She was still asleep. He didn't especially want to talk to her, so he got up quietly and slipped out of the room.

It was a nice day. The sun was out. Big billowy cumulus clouds sat off to the west. As Jamie drove back to his little two-bedroom house, he decided it might be a good day for mushroom hunting—quite possibly the final trip of the season.

Jamie knew he'd been spotted the last time he went, so he was going to take every precaution this time. He'd purchased a set of camouflage army fatigues, and today he'd put them to the test.

In an olive-green stocking cap, knee-high black rubber boots, the camo outfit, and his long ponytail, he looked a little like the rocker and gun enthusiast Ted Nugent, he thought, checking himself out in the mirror. Truth was he relished his part as the dark, counter-culture poet, stalker of the rare and sacred magic mushroom. There was something tragically romantic about it. He wasn't the mythic man. He was the swamp thing, the shadow of the myth.

Also new to Jamie's guerrilla tactics was a bicycle rack on the back of his VW bug. He strapped his ten-speed to the rack and buzzed out the freeway to Route 64, then headed west. As usual when he reached the magic valley, he motored all the way through. The field was empty and the farmer's pickup was nowhere in sight. He parked a mile farther off than the last time, took his bike from the rack, and pedaled the extra distance back to the mushroom field. Once there, he stashed his wheels in the weeds along the road and crawled into the field. The pickings were slim. The season was clearly coming to an end. Jamie ate the first ten mushrooms he found in preparation for a thorough and final search.

By the time he heard the sound of Smith's truck, he was well into his invisibility imaginings. Especially in the suit of camouflage, he considered himself more than ever at one with the pasture, a human chameleon. Completely invisible.

Maynard hadn't noticed the black VW as he drove into the valley, nor did he see the bicycle in the weeds. After stopping at the mailbox, he took a long look at the field. Then he motored up the driveway, still unaware that the picker was nearby.

After lunch Maynard lingered in his chair long after Ann had cleared the table. He was idly looking out the window at the pasture. He didn't see the picker nor did he even think he was there. He wasn't in a state of agitation, and he allowed himself to ponder the field he would usually rather forget. He thought a long time about something that should have been obvious all along. Finally he got up from the table and ambled out of the house to his pickup. Before he got into the cab, he stopped and gazed again at the black spot in his valley.

For all his life Maynard had seen God through nature. He imagined that changes in the weather, for instance, directly and indirectly reflected the various moods of God. God was always in communication with him in that way. He didn't think himself special in this. It was just that living as he did in his own valley, his own corner of the universe, everything that happened, good or bad, wet or dry, seemed a reflection of God's feelings toward Maynard Smith.

Today, with the sun shining so benevolently for a change, he was finally able to look down upon the dark pasture without trouble. During lunch he'd made the decision to never pasture the field again. He would abide by what seemed to be the wishes of both his father and the Man upstairs.

He climbed into his pickup and motored slowly down the gravel driveway, wondering how long it would be before he'd have to regrade it. When he reached the bottom of the driveway, he came to a full stop. He looked out into the pasture, still not seeing the picker, though half-imagining he would, very satisfied with his latest decision.

In this rare empathetic moment, Maynard recalled the question Ann had asked about the mushroom high several days before. He found himself wondering if the picker would eat the mushrooms while he picked them. Or did he eat them alone at night or at parties with other mushroom eaters? Or what? L-S-D. L-S-D. These three letters ran across his mind. He repeated them aloud, "L-S-D." What was it anyway? He remembered seeing something about it in the newspapers many years back. A hallucinogenic drug. That's what they called it. Technology's answer to God. Religion in a tablet. An ugly idea, he thought. Turn on, tune in, drop out. What did that mean? It was too foreign to him to understand. A farmer's life was tuning in. Tuning in to the land, not some kind of dream world in a tablet.

He turned right out of the driveway and pulled the truck up to the south edge of the pasture. He got out and let himself into the field through the cattle gate. His curiosity had finally gotten the better of him. He was actually going to find one of the little buggers himself.

The moment Jamie heard the truck door slam at the top of the hill he'd stilled himself behind a clump of tall marsh grass. Completely hidden, he watched the truck roll down the hill. He was certain he hadn't been seen, but his heart began to race when he saw M. Smith pull up alongside the gate, climb out of the truck, and enter the field. In the suit of camouflage and stoned on mushrooms, it wasn't exactly the best time to get up and introduce himself. Jamie had no choice. He committed himself to invisibility and lay out on his belly in the cold, wet, soggy grass.

As there weren't many mushrooms that day, it took Maynard quite a while to find one. Walking at random in the pasture, head down, stooping every now and then to inspect the ground, he recalled his dreams about the mushrooms being the sprouted eyes of the Kalapuya. Suddenly two of them, like eyeballs on thin stems, were peering up at him from the grass. Although there were

many different types of mushrooms that grew in the valley, something told Maynard these were the ones. He knelt down and delicately plucked one of them. Thinking of it as a sprouted eye, he held it up into the sunlight.

From Jamie's perspective, not fifteen yards away, the scene was stunning in its immediacy. His senses were tuned to the utmost, and his mind was in that transient state that tends to highlight the symbolic in everything. In wide splaying angles of light, the farmer had walked between Jamie and the sun, gone to a knee, and picked a mushroom. Jamie couldn't believe it. It looked like the man was going to eat one.

From across the short distance, Jamie could just detect a soft, low voice. *The man was praying.* The trees, the clouds, the sky, the wide open were fraught. The man's words, directed to some invisible entity, seemed to walk one by one, suspended in dilating time, across Jamie's mind.

"Sometimes I think us farmers are the only ones that got any idea who you are anymore, Lord. We wake up each morning about the same time as you, and start dealing with the problems of existence as soon as we can get a cup of coffee down and a seat on the throne. I believe you and I, we see eye to eye most of the time. I may be a dumb farmer, or maybe just dumb I guess, but I try my darndest to be straight with you.

"We all have personal struggles. That's what life is about if you ask me. But my struggle, year in and year out, is often with you. Fighting your seasons, your weather, your whim. It's my farm against your nature. Be sure I've pounded many a stake in your name.

"But I know for sure, the clearest, cleanest vision of life comes from your garden. And no one is closer to that than the plain old digging-in-the-dirt farmer. I know I can be pretty dang slow sometimes, but let's just say I think I've finally heard the message you been trying to tell me for some time now. Pardon the mule in me, but Dad was right. This land was not meant to be cultivated for some reason a lot bigger than me or this farm, and it has something to do with these mushrooms." He looked at the one in his hand and slowly shook his head. "I can't say I understand, but it ain't for me to understand everything."

Something in the elements had sprung in Maynard. Never before had he spoken spontaneously aloud to his god. It felt a little strange to him as he pondered the mushroom still in his hand, but it also felt good. "Lord, I'm giving you back this land."

When Maynard caught up with the words that had tumbled from his mouth, he bowed his head. And as he did so, out of the corner of his eye, he caught the movement of the lowly mushroom picker eavesdropping in the grass. His emotions were so filled with premonition he held his composure and pretended not to have seen through the veil of camouflage.

Maynard had no idea that he would pray aloud when he entered the field. He'd meant what he said and he'd spoken more emotionally to the air than he knew he could—as a simple man humbled before his god. It embarrassed him that this sentimental outpouring had been before a stranger. Then he was ashamed for being embarrassed for speaking openly to his god. But he was still tremendously angry for the invasion of property and privacy. Only Maynard's sense of humor prevented what could have been a very ugly scene.

“While I'm here, Lord,” Maynard continued aloud as though he'd seen nothing. “I'd like you to pass something along to that fella who does your mushroom picking.”

Jamie Reeves was already poised on every word, but when the farmer mentioned “mushroom picking,” his ears glowed red. From any other perspective, it was manifest absurdity. The one man on his knee was whispering to a man prone in the wet grass fifty feet away. But a scream could not have made the farmer's message any clearer to Jamie. As stoned as he was, it felt as though this man's god was really there, gleaming out of the sky like the sun, and listening.

“Now I'm not one to cast judgment on another man's life,” continued Maynard, “and I know deep down that picker is just another pawn, like myself, in your larger munificence. Maybe he's just someone you had to invent to get your message across to me, I don't know. But could you, please, ask him something for me next time you see him?” Maynard took a covert glance at the camouflaged picker with the ponytail. “Ask him what in Hell's name he's doing with these magic mushrooms? Because as far as I'm concerned they're mine, and I don't want to be part of an illegal operation. And then tell him, if I ever catch him out here again, I'll shoot his camouflaged-ass so full of rock salt he'll think he ate Mexican for a week. So help me, God. Amen.”

With that Maynard stood, tossed the mushroom into the air, and headed back to his pickup.

Needless to say, Jamie Reeves was blown away. He hadn't been invisible at all. The farmer had seen him and spoken directly to him. He wanted to sink right there into the muddy ground and really disappear, because more than anything else, Jamie felt like he'd been reprimanded by the Holy Spirit, or whatever it might be, through the vehicle of M. Smith, for selling the sacred

like candy. The mushrooms really were capable of giving a human the capacity to see through the veil. And it had just happened to Jamie very powerfully, clarifying what he'd already known but denied. Natural hallucinogens were an important sacrament, not a recreational banality. Selling them for profit broke the covenant with the magic. By doing so Jamie had forfeited the privilege to pick them, and he would never do it again.

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