

The Morel?

If at First You Don't Succeed.

An Oblong Love Story.

OH, DEMON MOREL! JUST because you look like a brain, does not mean you can outsmart me. I'm nearly positive about that. Why, just the other day, I spent three hours in the woods trying to find you as you played your little cat and mouse game with my fifty-something eyesight and your uncanny resemblance to the color of the desiccated elm and twisty maple leaves around you. I'm on to your ways. At one point, with the smell of crushed chives under my feet and the vision of young parasol plants nearby in a hardwood forest, I bent down to see if you were waiting as promised. You were not. But two deer, colorblind and probably enchanted, walked up behind me within ten yards and we gave each other heart attacks. By the sound of the approaching footsteps I thought they were two other 'shroomers like me or perhaps drug-dealing squatters so, friendly forager that I am, I stood up, spun around, and actually said *out loud*, "How's it going?" What they were thinking in venison could probably not be printed.

Why do I subject myself to this, hidden here among the flora, fauna, and whatever malevolent genus ticks fall under? Because, morel, hollow as you are, you are intoxicating and delicious. That you cost nearly fifty dollars a pound at gourmet markets when in season has nothing to do with this particular story. It is said by adroit pickers that once you find a tender morel during that small shifting window of time, from April to early May where I live in Illinois, you will be hopelessly compelled to look again every spring for as long as you both shall live. Hence, the scientific name for the yellow morel is *Morchella esculenta*, which is Latin for, "I will lead you through the damp woods by the nostril."

Morchella's siren song arrives every spring after a vulnerable soul like me has been housebound for three or more months by an unforgiving winter. The call arrives in the form of wild ramps and chives and wild green garlic that are punching up through the warming earth. Birds begin to fill your birdhouses with thatch and twigs and odd bits of wax

paper wrap from Dunkin' Donuts. On cue, the flapjack-sized pheasant back mushrooms arrive, also edible, (yawn), and the soprano section of dandelions explode to remind you what yellow looks like. A dying elm creaks, "Over here!" And the ground temperature is around fifty-seven degrees. And there may or may not be water nearby. And the online morel message board says, "They're close!" And it rained hard a couple of days ago and today it is delightfully warm! So you pull on your old hiking boots and tattered Levi's, feverishly grab your booty bag, and race like a homing pigeon to the secret honey hole where you discovered a few dozen last year. Just when you think every box in the forager's almanac has been checked, you notice with mounting disbelief that there's just one thing missing: You, Morchella. Not a whisper of your appearance. It takes two to tango and I am being utterly stood up by a mushroom.

How could this be when conditions seemed so perfect for your arrival? There's simply no rhyme or reason. According to the invaluable and potentially lifesaving *Edible Wild Mushrooms of Illinois*, "One might hunt for morels for eighty years and, in the end, realize they know nothing." Or, as the great French romantic Pepe Le Pew once observed, "Did you know that when you are in love, it is almost impossible to get insurance?"

Where the elusive morel is concerned you are guaranteed a walk in the woods, some lower back issues, and not much else. Plump, ready-for-my-close-up golden morels that I once found in a spot along a forest path near my house, nearly five pounds worth in a minute, have completely failed to appear for the past two years. Again, why? Why does a close friend find a blushing large morel growing inexplicably in the crack between his concrete driveway and the garage in the alley behind his house just north of Chicago? Come closer and I'll tell you why. The same reason that if you take a large minced shallot, a knob of butter, two pounds of chopped

morels, salt and pepper, and a splash of cream and cook it down slowly for thirty minutes or so, you will have a wild mushroom duxelles that will blow your head off in a singular steak sauce, tucked between two sheets of tender homemade pasta, or simply over toast with a spot of crème fraîche, that's why. Which is to say nobody truly knows why, and you, Morchella, ever the temptress, aren't taking questions today.

I spent one April afternoon in a large woods a few miles from home and found the beautiful palomino-colored head of a small morel pushing up through some damp leaves. Too small to disturb prematurely, but thar she blows. At that moment, there is no mistaking the little jump that your heart makes upon seeing one. No matter how old you are you can probably remember the sensation you felt as a kid when you lifted the pillow to find a coin where your molar had been. The difference here is that that particular thrill cost you a tooth. All you spent today was a little time under a canopy of trees and maybe a couple of scratches from the wild raspberry bushes that often appear like sentries in front of where you want to look. A week later I went back and found a small explosion of yellow morels, scattered like players on a soccer field. I'm not going to lie; it makes a person a little dizzy with joy.

One of the most satisfying aspects of morel hunting is the peace of mind you get from knowing that you have either found one or you haven't. From a safety-first perspective, during the time of year that morels grow here in the Midwest, there is virtually nothing else in the woods to confuse it for. Don't goof around and get interpretive. For one thing, all true morels through the stem are hollow as a peashooter. Even the cap, with its intricate fishnet design and tiny adorable chambers, is hollow inside which is why slicing lengthwise in half can be a helpful way to clean and discard one of nature's many surprise guests that may have come in from the rain. Respectfully show them to your compost pile and let them finish their business. Then pull out a skillet and some butter or reserved duck fat and up the ante.

Dear Morchella: A few warm days after my first attempt at a rendezvous, I walked for nearly two hours without finding you. Undoubtedly you were nearby but hidden from sight with the camouflage skills of a bush baby. I continued dejectedly onward lifting leaves with a branch, pushing shrubs aside, bending deeply at the knees, and other provocative displays to attract you. With some resignation, I began to imagine the taste of a peanut butter snack bar in the glove box of my car when, turning on the path for home, on the

fringe of an open sun-splashed area that was still ashen and black from a controlled burn, there you were. You and two dozen beautiful friends, basking right near the walking path, completely in the open, another one of your brilliant acts of legerdemain: hiding in plain sight. The only thing missing was a farm stand sign that read, "Giant Morels? Step Right Up!" I looked down both ends of the path to be sure no one was coming and then I picked and bagged like a jewel thief. Could it be possible that you, Morchella, felt a little compassion for me? (Where *Morchella esculenta* is concerned, nothing can be ruled out.)

Only a couple of weeks later, the weather turned dry and I reach what appears to be the always-disturbing end of the season. Quiet desperation is starting to seep into the online mushroom message board which now reads like postings for lost puppies. "Anybody having any luck?" "Seen any in DuPage County?" "Will pay \$\$\$\$ for morels!" Elusive as you are, I walked irrationally for three hours looking in some of your usual hideouts and came home with a completely empty bag. In one overgrown patch of woods, I managed to find a single large stem, hollow and moist, cleanly trimmed by the son-of-a-bitch who got to you first. Who knew that there might actually be something worse than finding no morels at all?

Inevitably, it has become painfully obvious that you have blown town, gone for another year. That's your way. This year when our history together says you should be at your peak, safe in my kitchen, cradled and dancing in a fourteen-inch frying pan, you are nowhere to be found. Just to the north, in Wisconsin, there is a flurry of news that they are finding morels so easily that you'd think they were growing right in the crisper. People are shamelessly bragging about their conquests using tawdry mycology jargon like "bushel basket" and "shopping bag." I don't care. I'm not going. On a perfect sunny day, with the taste of morels and fettuccine on my mind, I go out one last time. I confess that there is a modest loss of dignity you experience while walking through the woods alone looking for a mushroom that you strongly suspect isn't there. A walk of shame without the cummerbund. On the off chance that I run into someone who asks if I'm looking for you, I am poised and ready to say, "Me? Ha! Don't be ridiculous!" But no one is out here in this sun-dappled forest but me. Me and two beautiful deer that I have spoken to personally. So I trek on anyway hoping for just one more peek, one more heady taste, because that—*Morchella esculenta* —is how much I love you. Until we meet again.