

THE LITTLE MUSHROOM

John Reed

There was once a little mushroom. And this is the story of the little mushroom. . . .

A family of mushrooms grew from the damp, black soil near a stream, in the cool shade of trees. There were big mushrooms and bigger mushrooms and even a biggest mushroom. And there were little mushrooms and littler mushrooms.

But the little mushroom was the very littlest.

And even though they all seemed different, they were really all related, because they were all connected underground.

And the little mushroom could feel everything good – like when a new mushroom sprouted up into the field, or when another mushroom soaked up the water through the damp soil, or was in a cool shade on a warm day, because they were all connected underground.

But the little mushroom could also feel everything bad – like when another mushroom was pecked by a bird, or dried up when the stream was low, or carried away when the stream was high, or burned when a branch fell down and the sun shone through, because they were all connected underground.

But usually the little mushroom was happy, because there were more things to make a little mushroom happy than there were to make a little mushroom sad. . . .

Until another animal came to the trees near the stream, singing the song –

*My family is gone.
So here I am alone.
So I can try again
To build myself a home.*

During the days, the animal would go away. At night, it would come back to eat its food, and sleep under the branches of a big tree.

But when the animal walked to and from the stream, or in and out of the forest, sometimes it trampled the mushrooms. And the little mushroom could feel that too, because they were all connected underground.

And with the cold, the animal became even more restless, walking across the field from here to there, feeling the trees, and rubbing its feet. At night, it would curl itself into a ball and shake. . . .

And then one day, it cut down the branches of the big tree.

And if they could have, all the mushrooms would have warned the animal that the sun would burn it without the cool shade of the tree – and that the rain would wash it away without leaves for shelter during storms. But the man couldn't live like a mushroom. And when the sun burned all the mushrooms whose shade was gone, and the rain from a storm washed all the unsheltered mushrooms away, the little mushroom felt all the pain, because they were all connected underground.

Then the animal chopped the branches of the big tree into boards and laid them on the ground where it used to sleep in the shade of the leaves – the leaves of the big tree – that were gone.

And if they could have, all the mushrooms would have warned the animal that if the earth was covered, it wouldn't be able to take root, or nourish itself from the soil. But the man couldn't live like a mushroom. And as the boards were laid down, the mushrooms that had been there before were crushed

under the new floor. And the little mushroom felt the pain, because they were all connected underground.

Then the animal cut down the big tree, and made walls to enclose the floor, and a roof to cover up the walls, to build a house where the big tree used to be. And when the house was done, the animal made a door, and went inside.

And if they could have, all the mushrooms would have finally understood the animal, because they also needed a warm, dark place to grow.

Each day, as the winter came, the animal would return from the woods with less to eat. And once, while it walked on the path to the house, it noticed a very big mushroom – the very biggest mushroom. Then the animal knelt down beside the very biggest mushroom, and touched its cap. Then it touched its stem, and felt it all over. And then the animal picked the biggest mushroom, washed it in the stream, and disappeared with it into the house. And the little mushroom felt when the animal took the very biggest mushroom away, because they were all connected underground.

And then, the next day, the animal came and picked the next biggest mushroom – and the next – and the next – and disappeared with them into the house. And then, every day, the animal came to pick mushrooms. Until finally, there were no more mushrooms, except the little mushroom, who was left all alone, and felt very small. . . .

And all night, the little mushroom felt all the other mushrooms that were gone, because once, they were all connected underground.

The next day, the animal found the little mushroom, and picked it. And the little mushroom was thrown into a basket full of roots and nuts and leaves. And then, with all the other ingredients in the basket, the little mushroom was thrown into a pot of water.

And the scalding hot water become hotter.

But as the little mushroom cooked, all the roots and leaves and nuts came together in the broth. And as hot as it was, for all of them, it was like having another family. . . .

But then, the little mushroom felt the pain all over again, of losing a family, as the animal ate up the stew, until there was nothing left but the little mushroom.

But the little mushroom had shrunken even smaller in the hot water, and had become so small, so very small, that the animal just drank up the little mushroom with the broth.

So the little mushroom disappeared into the animal's mouth, and slid down the animal's throat.

But that wasn't the end of the little mushroom, because when the little mushroom landed at the bottom of the animal's belly, it was so very dark, and soft, and warm, that the little mushroom knew it had never been in a better place to grow.

And the little mushroom grew.

Inside the animal, it was cozy. Sometimes the animal walked out to the field, across the grass to the stream, or into the forest to fetch some water, or find some food. And when the animal drank the water, and ate the food, the little mushroom also drank the water and ate the food, taking the nourishment through its roots.

So the little mushroom grew.

And as the little mushroom grew, the animal became smaller, and it didn't go to the stream, or into the forest, as much anymore. The animal didn't eat or drink as often as it once did. And sometimes, it breathed hard, or clutched its stomach and moaned. Then the animal began to lie down, even in the daytime. And when the animal had stopped moving around so much, bouncing the little

mushroom all over, the little mushroom could finally take root in its soft surroundings.

So the little mushroom could grow, even bigger.

And as the little mushroom grew, the little mushroom could feel the animal moving less and less. Until, finally, it hardly moved at all. It just clutched its stomach, moaned, breathed hard, and sang the song—

My family is gone.

So here I am alone.

I've come to try again.

And this is where I am.

And as the animal became even softer, the little mushroom's roots grew even deeper. And the little mushroom grew even bigger.

Then the animal stopped moving altogether. It didn't clutch its stomach, moan, breath hard, sing, or do anything at all. And then the animal became even softer, warmer, and moister. And the little mushroom grew and grew until the little mushroom became so big, and heavy, that the little mushroom fell through the floor.

And when the little mushroom's roots grew down into the ground, the little mushroom grew up, even bigger.

Until finally, the little mushroom grew too big for the little house, and pushed down one of the walls—then the little mushroom pushed down another—then another—then the last wall fell too, and only the roof stayed balanced on the little mushroom, like an umbrella protecting it from the sun.

And even long after the little mushroom was gone, its roots were still all under the ground. And so, slowly, little mushrooms and littler mushrooms, big mushrooms and bigger mushrooms sprouted up all over. Until one day, they covered the black soil, near the stream, in the cool shade of trees—again.

