

This Is the Air

by Paul j Rogers

I don't give a crap about mushrooms. But people who do will tell you that if you're after a decent yield then you'll need special sheds as temperature and humidity (not light, as many believe) are the most important factors. They're grown indoors because the climate isn't conducive to year-round harvests. Mind you, the climate in South West England isn't conducive to anything, except, perhaps, boredom.

Like I said, mushrooms blow and all I do is pick them – button, chestnut, flat, portobello – I'm a part-time harvester, seven-till-seven, three nights a week. Still, it pays pretty well. That's the only reason I do it. I harvest mushrooms three nights a week in cold sheds so that the rest of the time I can do as I please.

When I first started, they taught us about the different species and how to de-stalk them with a mushroom knife. My shifts were pretty haphazard back then, mostly covering people's sickies. After that, I worked one day on, one day off. Now, though, after a year of sliding along aisles on a trolley in the dark, my week is nicely blocked. Sunday to Tuesday and then I'm done. In a neoliberal society that couldn't give a toss, it's the best deal you can hope for.

Which is why I always leave home in plenty of time before a shift. I need this job and I intend to keep it. After all, there are many willing to fill my wellies, even if most of them would be out on their ear after the first performance appraisal. Not that I worry about job security too much. The other day, the farm manager even asked me to go full-time. "Been in the special shed, Mark?" I said to him. "You know, the one that says, 'Fly Agarics: Do Not Consume!'"

Magic mushrooms are a running joke at work. It's kind of an ironic thing. After all, when people hear what you do that's all you get. Timothy Leary this, *Sgt. Pepper* that – and always like it's the first time you ever heard it. Funny how they always reference sixties psychedelia. It's like nobody ever tripped after *Magical Mystery Tour*. Truth be told, I've never been a fan of The Beatles in any of their incarnations. Nope, I'd take Jack White over *The White Album* any day. Jack White, incidentally, is what I'm listening to now as I'm driving to work.

Before the farm I worked with my old man for a while, but I'm not cut out for glazing shop windows that were kicked in on a Friday night by drunks. Can't say I dig the tradesman's camaraderie either, if that's what reading *The Sun* and making dodgy jokes is called. Anyway, me and the old man don't get along. He reckons I'm clumsy and like to dream and maybe he's right. That means one day Hardwick's Glaziers will belong to Dean – which is fine by me – because my kid brother was born with a pair of glass-breaking pliers in one of his enormous paws. In the other was a pint of lager, probably.

I, on the other hand, have built a highly-varied curriculum vitae since graduating university. Print shop trainee manager; barman in Corfu; building site labourer; motorcycle courier in Bristol; bookshop sales assistant; seasonal Land Train driver on Weston seafront – the list is as long as it is gormless. Measured in terms of fiscal benefit, my career, so far, has yet to yield a great return. Any social status garnered by being the only one in our family to graduate higher education has worn pretty thin as well. Mum still tells her friends I'm taking a gap year. At twenty-nine.

I pull in at Speakman's for some biodiesel. Speakman's juice is a little expensive although it's high-percentage veggie – B70 – not like the crap the multinationals punt out to boost their green credentials. Except for the biodiesel pump and phone top-up cards in the

shop, I doubt this place has changed much since the eighties. It's well worth the detour into Wrington, though. In fact, I rarely fill up my truck anywhere else.

The good thing about a Lada Cossack is that most people don't know what the hell it is you're driving. I say *the* good thing like there's only one, but there are in fact many. For starters, it's honest and it's hardy. These trucks laugh at rough terrain. I mean it. And they always start although it's not like we ever get any interesting weather in North Somerset. But if we did, first they'd start and then they'd laugh at it.

Being a ninety-one this one's ancient and must've rolled off the production line around the time I started infant school. I bought a Lada because I'm into Pushkin and Dostoyevsky. If they were alive today I reckon they'd drive Cossacks – Nivas – as they're called in the motherland. Actually, Pushkin would ride a classic motorcycle, perhaps a BSA, but he'd have a fleet of Nivas on his estate. The guy who owned this before fitted a diesel out of a Citroën, which sealed the deal because this Russian beast of burden now has the heart and lungs of Voltaire. Surprising as it may seem, I did learn something at university.

"Fill her up, George," I tell old Speakman. "Thirty litres of your finest carrot fat." The old man adjusts his hearing aid, so I repeat *thirty litres* to be sure. I doubt whether he's called George, though. He can't hear so I could've called him Susan and he'd never have known the difference. "Gonna need some engine oil too, George, but we'll worry about that in a bit."

A quick rummage for my beanie as it's nippy before a BMW glides into the other bay, slowly, so as not to scratch his paintwork on the back hoe of a Massey Ferguson. In all the months I've been coming here, I've never seen another vehicle on the forecourt, not once. Being a regular customer, I take the nozzle so Speakman can deal with that German spaceship alongside. After all, having two customers at the same time is enough to make the old goat's ticker give out.

"Hardwick!" the driver of that Beemer says in my direction.

It takes a few seconds to place his face and then it comes to me. The owner of that Five Series is my old schoolmate, Ian Plaistow. It's good to see him although I wish he'd called me 'Dom' or even 'Dominic'.

"Ian," I say, letting that whole surname thing slide. "Good to see you."

"What the hell's that you're driving?"

"Gets me around," I tell him. "What you up to these days?"

"That thing offends the eyes," he says, laughing at his own joke before the words have even left his mouth.

"Well, I like it," I say, trying hard to smile.

"Very you," he says, still grinning.

I don't know what that means because I haven't seen him in thirteen or fourteen years so these days he hasn't got a clue who the hell I am. Back when I did know him, this truck most definitely wasn't me, as he well knows. Guess he must've had a rough day as there's nothing else I can point at to explain his current vibe. As nice as it'd be to catch up with an old mate, I'm not sure we'd get along and start to wonder whether I'll give him my number should he ask. He tells old Speakman he wants unleaded so I turn my back and start to pump gas.

"Where you working these days?" Plaistow says. He's alongside me now, Speakman behind us pumping his gas. He doesn't offer a hand to shake, fine by me.

"Out in Langford, mushroom farm."

"Manager?"

"Nah, I pick mushrooms three nights a week."

A grin spreads across his chops and remains a permanent fixture. Now peering inside my truck, he casts an eye over the assorted snack bar wrappers and my Carhartt on the

passenger seat. He's wearing a suit and dress coat. Both look expensive although the coat's not a great fit.

"Are the mushrooms of the magic variety?"

"That's a great joke, Ian. I'll have to write that down." His grin melts a little. I keep my boat race deadpan. I'm good at this, deadpan expressions come easy.

"Exciting times," he says. "Just floated the business on the Professional Securities Market."

I give him a nod but there's nothing to say about that so I don't.

"So, what else's happening?" he says. "Besides picking mushrooms and farting around in Soviet machinery."

"It's something, isn't it?" I tell him, meaning the Cossack.

"I thought you went to university?"

"I did go to university, Ian."

"Jesus," he says. "I made the right choice then."

I'm guessing he means not going to university himself although I'm surprised because I always assumed he had. He's now looking at me with an expression an acting teacher might wear when demonstrating smugness.

"Trading that one in soon," he says, without bothering to look over at his car. "New Bimmer, upgrading to the M Sport Touring. More a work of art than a piece of engineering."

That's right Plaistow, a more expensive car will make you happy, make your life complete. For about a week. God knows why he called it a "Bimmer". For all I know it's the correct term but I'm not wasting thirty seconds of my life to Google it and find out. A knocking sound from behind, old Speakman tapping out the last few drops.

"Careful," Plaistow says to the old man, "that's a 520i Luxury Saloon."

"Biodiesel," I tell him, nodding at the Cossack, "almost neat. Stoners chase me when they've got the munchies." Fourteen fifty-six it says on the pump display. Not quite a full tank but with him peering over my shoulder it'll have to do.

"We had some times, hey?" he says. "School, great days, living the easy life."

I nod but I'm not in the mood to reminisce although he's right that life used to be much clearer. After screwing back my fuel cap I open the driver's door, which creaks, to get at my wallet. Over Speakman's door is a hand-painted sign that says *I Prefers Cash*. However many times I've seen it, it still raises a smile. Not today, though. Plaistow's alongside so I hold the door for him.

"Seriously, Hardwick..."

"My name's Dom."

"Okay, Dom then. How come you ended up like this?"

For some reason I think of Nikki Taylor. Nikki was my girlfriend for a while back at school. She lived near Plaistow on the Bournville Estate, two-up two-down houses meant for workers at a chocolate factory that was never built. Walking her home got to be a drag because our house was on the other side of town. There's an edge to the Bournville. Once I had to leg it to the railway bridge chased by a gang of mutant ninja hoodies.

"I'm happy with my life," I tell Plaistow, "do it all again, no problem." I ask Speakman how much and peel off a twenty. Plaistow pays for his on MasterCard. Then I remember I need motor oil. "Take care of yourself, Ian," I say as I brush past.

At the back of the shop my fists ball as I stare at Castrol GTX. Plaistow appears alongside, grinning. He shakes his head at the empty shelves – a sorry assortment of motoring accessories – and says this place needs taking over by a multinational. He's heading home to watch a movie on his new, cinema quality, home entertainment system he then tells me. I keep my eyes on oil cans wondering who made him the new lord mayor of Chips & Gravy

Town.

“Blu-ray is a totally different experience to DVD,” he’s now telling me. “Here’s my card.”

I don’t lift my eyes from the can I’m studying as I take it.

“Guess you do all your networking on the side of a punnet,” he says.

The bell rings behind me. Mercifully, he’s leaving.

“If you ever fancy a career in finance,” he shouts, “give us a call. You’ve got a good brain, Hardwick. Let me help you to use it.”

“Idiot,” I say after him, although he probably doesn’t hear.

At the till, I watch his taillights, two red slits, blinking in the dark. It’s hard to know where all that came from, what’d prompted Plaistow’s little act. We’d been good mates at school and then during A-levels we lost contact, different friends, no big falling out. Fuck off, Plaistow. There’s no reason for a stunt like that.

Bonnet up, I check the dipstick, old Speakman alongside with a rag.

Very you, he said about the Cossack – yeah, right on – yet the remark was about market value because he knows nothing of the notions I attach to it. Had I ever wronged him? Not that I recall. No, I’d simply outgrown him.

“Thanks,” I say to Speakman. Bet he’ll soak that rag and reuse it with someone else. I don’t call him ‘George’ though because Plaistow’s killed my sense of fun. A surge of aggression as I recall his face, pure testosterone, before slamming the bonnet twice because it won’t lock. I get into my truck.

Plaistow’s a moron – accept their rules, work hard, pay tax. Should’ve banged him up against his car while I had the chance. That car, which could’ve just as easily been an Audi or Merc, is his identity, yet the only thing that’s special is the price. If I ever won a million smackers I’d buy another Cossack when this one died.

It’s cold in here – see my breath – so I give the door a yank. After shoving junk into the footwell, I check out Plaistow’s business card. I could call, or send a text, ask him straight what gives. Instead, I root him out on Facebook and find a picture of him leaning on his ‘Bimmer’ with a grin. Other than that, he seems to like Kasabian and a bunch of other crap.

The key slides into the ignition.

A moment later, I’m pacing the forecourt.

Who could be satisfied with this rusting hunk of Russian junk? This thing’s a leper bell on wheels – one that rings out that you’re broke, unclean, unclean! Every month you pay back Dad, chipping at the debt with a teaspoon when it’d take forever with a drill. Plaistow’s right. You should’ve studied something useful and joined the rat race at eighteen just like him. The humanities – what were you thinking! You’re a clown, you chump, a buffoon without a dream, and one with no backbone too, as you meekly follow society’s means. You’ve wasted your time, not to mention money, and this toil at the farm must stop. It’s a defeat, you mental bastard – ritualised failure – three nights a week. What a disaster, all the wrong choices, all the wrong thoughts. There’s only one thing for it. You’ll have to start a business.

I sit here on Speakman’s forecourt chilling my brains in just a t-shirt and jeans. It’s late November and soft tissue gets cold pretty quick. For another ten minutes I sit on this bench, turning things over inside my head before the truck door closes with a thud. So far I haven’t thought of a single idea for a business, not that I really tried.

Plaistow didn’t act that way because of me. He’d behave like that if he bumped into anyone from school. That little show was about where he’s from and where he now thinks he’s at. His car costs more than the average car, his job, better than the average job, and so, almost certainly, is his house. What happened back there, it now dawns on me, was a late capitalist exchange between two differently-positioned consumers. I hunt for a pen to write

that down but can't find one and give up.

Bollocks to him. He's welcome to his lofty perch, flash car and nice house. This world is full of Plaistows, none of them happy, all measuring themselves by what they've got. Welcome to Planet Plaistow. And by the way it sucks. Still, I noted on his Facebook that his favourite movie's *Atlas Shrugged* and that just cracks me up. I whip off my beanie and toss it in the back. After that, my head drops to the steering wheel and I study my trainers through the spokes. These shoes need replacing although I guess it'll have to wait.

Desperation takes hold and I consider going off the grid – joining the alternative economy – postcapitalism, no credit, no cash. Then I have this crazy idea to carpool the Cossack and run it on chip fat. There'll be others who think like me, I reason, thousands of them, perhaps. I'll find them. They'll be online and if they aren't I'll start something up. That's what the internet's for – not selling crap. And if someone can't trade, just give it them free. There you go Plaistow latch onto that!

But the daydream doesn't last, less than a minute, to be exact. "Utopian fantasy," I mutter, then a snort and a bang of the dash.

Through the windscreen, I clock old Speakman. He's watching me, over by the silo, gawking and chewing gum. I grin, like a madman, then wave – how many years has he worked these pumps? Speakman, however, just stares.

Fingers twitching on the wheel, I let both hands drop into my lap. Life used to be fun, have meaning, but now everything's come on top. No more farm or picking mushrooms. That much I know. I quit, right now, in fact.

I start to wonder if we could build the business, diversify out of glass. Speakman, after all, seems happy being his own boss. Yet I can't go back, even tail between my legs, because ever since the last recession they've been down to just one van. Suction cups and putty ain't me, anyhow, and Dean's welcome to his wife and kids and mortgage.

I think I understand him now, Plaistow.

He started at the bottom, in his mind.

I guess that still hurts. Maybe it always will.

Time's run away. Ten minutes till my shift. I put the key in the ignition. No problem. These trucks always start. Still don't give a crap about mushrooms, though. By the time they reach the table fifty percent are spoiled – how wasteful is that? Two more shifts and I'm done for another week. I need this job and intend to keep it as there are many who'd kill to work the nightshift. I give the key a twist, a little bit of choke, and then a shudder and a rumble and the Cossack starts first time. I nod at Speakman, George, as I sometimes call him for a laugh. The handbrake creaks as it's released. Then I stand on the gas.