BOYS! RAISE GIANT MUSHROOMS IN YOUR CELLAR (1962)

Hugh Fortnum woke to Saturday's commotions and lay, eyes shut, savoring each in its turn.

Below, bacon in a skillet; Cynthia waking him with fine cookings instead of cries. Across the hall, Tom actually taking a shower.

Far off in the bumblebee dragonfly light, whose voice was already damning the weather, the time, and the tides? Mrs. Goodbody? Yes.

That Christian giantess, six foot tall with her shoes off, the gardener extraordinary, the octogenarian dietitian and town philosopher.

He rose, unhooked the screen and leaned out to hear her cry, "There! Take that! This'll fix you! Hah!"

"Happy Saturday, Mrs. Goodbody!"

The old-woman froze in clouds of bug spray pumped from an immense gun. "Nonsense!" she shouted. "With these fiends and pests to watch for?"

"What kind this time?" called Fortnum. "I don't want to shout it to the jaybirds, but..." she glanced suspiciously around "...what would you say if I told you I was the first line of defense concerning flying saucers?"

"Fine," replied Fortnum. "There'll be rockets between the worlds any year now."

"There already are!" She pumped, aiming the spray under the hedge.

"There! Take that!" He pulled his head back in from the fresh day, somehow not as high-spirited as his first response had indicated. Poor soul, Mrs. Goodbody. Always the essence of reason. And now what? Old age?

The doorbell rang. He grabbed his robe and was half down the stairs when he heard a voice say, "Special delivery. Fortnum?" and saw Cynthia turn from the front door, a small packet in her hand.

"Special-delivery airmail for your son."

Tom was downstairs like a centipede. "Wow! That must be from the Great Bayou Novelty Greenhouse!"

"I wish I were as excited about ordinary mail," observed Fortnum.

"Ordinary!" Tom ripped the cord and paper wildly. "Don't you read the back pages of Popular Mechanics? Well, here they are!

Everyone peered into the small open box.

"Here," said Fortnum, "what are?"

"The Sylvan Glade Jumbo-Giant Guaranteed Growth Raise-Them-in-Your-Cellar-for-Big-Profit Mushrooms!"

"Oh, of course," said Fortnum. "How silly of me."

Cynthia squinted. "Those little teeny bits?"

"Fabulous growth in twenty-four hours", Tom quoted from memory. "Plant them in your cellar."

Fortnum and wife exchanged glances. "Well," she admitted, "It's better than frogs and green snakes."

"Sure it is!" Tom ran. "Oh, Tom," said Fortnum lightly. Tom paused at the cellar door. "Tom," said his father. "Next time, fourth-class mail would do fine."

"Heck," said Tom. "They must’ve made a mistake, thought I was some rich company. Airmail special, who can afford that?"

The cellar door slammed. Fortnum, bemused, scanned the wrapper a moment then dropped it into the wastebasket. On his way to the kitchen, he opened the cellar door.

Tom was already on his knees, digging with a hand rake in the dirt. He felt his wife beside him, breathing softly, looking down into the cool dimness. "Those are mushrooms, I hope. Not ... toadstools?" Fortnum laughed. "Happy harvest, farmer!" Tom glanced up and waved. Fortnum shut the door, took his wife's arm and walked her out to the kitchen, feeling fine.

Toward noon, Fortnum was driving toward the nearest market when he saw Roger Willis, a fellow Rotarian and a teacher of biology at the town high school, waving urgently from the sidewalk.

Fortnum pulled his car up and opened the door. "Hi, Roger, give you a lift?" Willis responded all too eagerly, jumping in and slamming the door. "Just the man I want to see. I've put off calling for days. Could you play psychiatrist for five minutes, God help you?"

Fortnum examined his friend for a moment as he drove quietly on. "God help you, yes. Shoot."

Willis sat back and studied his fingernails. "Let's just drive a moment. There. Okay. Here's what I want to say: Something's wrong with the world."

Fortnum laughed easily. "Hasn!t there always been?" "No, no, I mean ... something strange-something unseen -is happening."

Mrs. Goodbody," said Fortnum, half to himself, and stopped.

"Mrs. Goodbody?"

"This morning, gave me a talk on flying saucers."

"No!" Willis bit the knuckle of his forefinger nervously. "Nothing like saucers. At least, I don't think. Tell me, what exactly is intuition?"

"The conscious recognition of something that's been subconscious for a long time. But don't quote this amateur psychologist!" He laughed again.

"Good, good!" Willis turned, big face lighting. He readjusted himself in the seat. "That’s it! Over a long period, things gather, right? All of a sudden, you have to spit, but you don't remember saliva collecting. Your hands are dirty but you don't know how they got that way. Dust falls on you every day and you don't feel it. But when you get enough dust collected up, there it is, you see and name it. That is intuition, as far as I'm concerned. Well, what kind of du has been falling on me? A few meteors in the sky at night? Funny weather just before dawn? I don't know. Certain colors, smells, the way the house creaks at three in the morning? Hair prickling on my arms? All I know is the damn dust has collected. Quite suddenly I know."

"Yes," said Fortnum, disquieted. "But what is it you know?"

Willis looked at his hands in his lap. "I'm afraid. I'm not afraid. Then I'm afraid again, in the middle of the day. Doctors checked me. I'm A-one. No family problems. Joe a fine boy, a good son. Dorothy? She's remarkable. With her I'm not afraid of growing old or dying."

"Lucky man."

"But beyond my luck now. Scared stiff, really, for myself, my family; even right now, for you."

"Me?" said Fortnum. They had stopped now by an empty lot near the mark. There was a moment of great stillness, in which Fortnum turned to survey his friend. Willis' voice had suddenly mad him cold. "I'm afraid for everybody," said Willis. "Your friends, mine and their friends, on out of sight. Pretty silly, eh?"

Willis opened the door, got out and peered in at Fortnum. Fortnum felt he had to speak.

"Well, what do we do about it?"

Willis looked up at the sun burning blind in the sky. "Be aware," he said slowly. "Watch everything for a few days.

"Everything?"

"We don't use half what God gave us, ten per cent of the time. We ought to hear more, feel more, smell more, taste more. Maybe there's something wrong with the way the wind blows these weeds there in the lot. Maybe it's the sun up on those telephone wires or the cicadas singing in the elm tree. If only we could stop, look, listen, a few days, a few nights and compare notes. Tell me to shut up then, and I will."

"Good enough," said Fortnum, playing it lighter than I felt. "I'll look around. But how do I know the thing I'm looking for when I see it?"

Willis peered in at him, sincerely. "You'll know. You've got to know. Or we're done for, all of us," he said quietly.

Fortnum shut the door and didn't know what to say. He felt a rush of embarrassment creeping up his face. Willis sensed this. "Hugh, do you think I'm ... off my rocker?"

"Nonsense!" said Fortnum, too quickly. "You're just nervous, is all. You should take a week off."

Willis nodded. "See you Monday night?" "Any time. Drop around."

"I hope I will, Hugh. I really hope I will."

Then Willis was gone, hurrying across the dry weed-grown lot toward the side entrance of the market.

Watching him go Fortnum suddenly did not want to move. He discovered that very slowly he was taking deep breaths, weighing the silence. He licked his lips tasting the salt. He looked at his arm on the doorsill, the sunlight burning the golden hairs. In the empty lot the wind moved all alone to itself. He leaned out to look at the sun, which stared back with one massive stunning blow of intense power that made him jerk his head in. He exhaled. Then he laughed out loud.

Then he drove away.

The lemonade glass was cool and deliciously sweaty. The ice made music inside the glass, and the lemonade was just sour enough, just sweet enough on his tongue. He sipped, he savored, he tilted back in the wicker rocking chair on the twilight front porch, his eyes closed.

The crickets were chirping out on the lawn. Cynthia, knitting across from him on the porch, eyed him curiously; he could feel her attention.

"What are you up to?" she said at last.

"Cynthia," he said, "is your intuition in running order? Is this earthquake weather? Is the land going to sink? Will war be declared? Or is it only that our delphinium will die of the blight?"

"Hold on. Let me feel my bones."

He opened his eyes and watched Cynthia in turn closing hers and sitting absolutely statue-still, her hands on her knees. Finally she shook her head and smiled. "No. No war declared. No land sinking. Not even a blight. Why?"

"I've met a lot of doom talkers today. Well, two anyway, and---"

The screen door burst wide. Fortnum’s body jerked as if he had been struck. "What--"

Tom, a gardener's wooden flat in his arms, stepped out on the porch. "Sorry," he said. "What's wrong, Dad?"

"Nothing." Fortnum stood up, glad to be moving. "Is that the crops?"

Tom moved forward eagerly. "Part of it. Boy, they're doing great. In just seven hours, with lots of water, look how big the darn things are!" He set the flat on the table between his parents.

The crop was indeed plentiful. Hundreds of small grayishbrown mushrooms were sprouting up in the damp soil. "I'll be damned," said Fortnum, impressed.

Cynthia put out her hand to touch the flat, then took it away uneasily.

"I hate to be a spoilsport, but ... there's no way for these to be anything else but mushrooms, is there?"

Tom looked as if he had been insulted. "What do you think I'm going to feed you? Poisoned fungoides?"

"That's just it," said Cynthia quickly. "How do you tell them out?"

"Eat 'em," said Tom. "If you live, they're mushrooms. If you drop dead, well!" He gave a great guffaw, which amused Fortnum but only made his mother wince. She sat back in her chair. "I-I don't like them," she said. "Boy, oh, boy."

Tom seized the flat angrily. "When are we going to have the next wet-blanket sale in this house?"

He shuffled morosely away. "Tom-" said Fortnum. "Never mind," said Tom. "Everyone figures they’ll be ruined by the boy entrepreneur. To heck with it!"

Fortnum got inside just as Tom heaved the mushrooms, flat and all, down the cellar stairs. He slammed the cellar door and ran out the back door.

Fortnum turned back to his wife, who, stricken, glanced away.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't know why, I just had to say that to Tom. I--"

The phone rang. Fortnum brought the phone outside on it extension cord.

"Hugh?" It was Dorothy Willis's voice. She sounded suddenly very old and very frightened. "Hugh, Roger isn't there, is he?"

"Dorothy? No."

"He's gone!" said Dorothy. "All his clothes were taken from the closet." She began to cry.

"Dorothy, hold on, I'll be there in a minute."

"You must help, oh, you must. Something's happened to him, I know it," she wailed. "Unless you do something, we'll never see him alive again."

Very slowly he put the receiver back on its book, her voice weeping inside it. The night crickets quite suddenly were very loud. He felt the hairs, one by one, go up on the back of his neck. Hair can't do that, he thought. Silly, silly. It can't do that, not in real life, it can't! But, one by slow prickling one, his hair did.

The wire hangers were indeed empty. With a clatter, Fortnum shoved them aside and down along the rod, then turned and looked out of the closet at Dorothy Willis and her son Joe.

"I was just walking by," said Joe, "and saw the closet empty, all Dad's clothes gone!"

"Everything was fine," said Dorothy. "We've had a wonderful life. I don't understand, I don't, I don't!" She began to cry again, putting her hands to her face.

Fortnum stepped out of the closet. "You didn't hear him leave the house?"

"We were playing catch out front," said Joe. "Dad said he had to go in for a minute. I went around back. Then he was gone!"

"He must have packed quickly and walked wherever he was going, so we wouldn't hear a cab pull up in front of the house."

They were moving out through the hall now. "I’ll check the train depot and the airport." Fortnum hesitated. "Dorothy, is there anything in Roger's background--"

"It wasn't insanity took him." She hesitated. "I feel, somehow, he was kidnapped."

Fortnum shook his head. "It doesn't seem reasonable he would arrange to pack, walk out of the house and go meet his abductors."

Dorothy opened the door as if to let the night or the night wind move down the hall as she turned to stare back through the rooms, her voice wandering. "No. Somehow they came into the house. Right in front of us, they stole him away."

And then: "A terrible thing has happened."

Fortnum stepped out into the night of crickets and rustling trees. The doom talkers, he thought, talking their dooms. Mrs. Goodbody, Roger, and now Roger's wife. Something terrible has happened. But what, in God's name? And how?

He looked from Dorothy to her son. Joe, blinking the wetness from his eyes, took a long time to turn, walk along the hall and stop, fingering the knob of the cellar door.

Fortnum felt his eyelids twitch, his iris flex, as if he were snapping a picture of something he wanted to remember.

Joe pulled the cellar door wide, stepped down out of sight, gone.

The door tapped shut.

Fortnum opened his mouth to speak, but Dorothy's hand was taking his now, he had to look at her. "Please," she said. "Find him for me."

He kissed her cheek. "If it's humanly possible." If it's humanly possible. Good Lord, why had he picked those words?

He walked off into the summer night.

A gasp, an exhalation, a gasp, an exhalation, an asthmatic insuck, a vaporing sneeze. Somebody dying in the dark? No.

Just Mrs. Goodbody, unseen beyond the hedge, working late, her hand pump aimed, her bony elbow thrusting. The sick-sweet smell of bug spray enveloped Fortnum as he reached his house. "Mrs. Goodbody? Still at it?"

From the black hedge her voice leaped. "Damn it, yes! Aphids, water bugs, woodworms, and now the Marasmius oreades. Lord, it grows fast!"

"What does?"

"The Marasmius oreades, of course! It's me against them and I intend to win! There! There! There!"

He left the hedge, the gasping pump, the wheezing voice, and found his wife waiting for him on the porch almost as if she were going to take up where Dorothy had left off at her door a few minutes ago.

Fortnum was about to speak when a shadow moved in aide. There was a creaking noise. A knob rattled.

Tom vanished into the basement.

Fortnum felt as if someone had set off an explosion in his face. He reeled. Everything had the numbed familiarity of those waking dreams where all motions are remembered before they occur, all dialogue known before it falls from the lips.

He found himself staring at the shut basement door. Cynthia took him inside, amused.

"What? Tom? Oh, I relented. The darn mushrooms meant so much to him. Besides, when he threw them into the cellar they did nicely, just lying in the dirt----"

"Did they?" Fortnum heard himself say.

Cynthia took his arm "What about Roger?"

"He's gone, yes."

"Men, men, men," she said.

"No, you're wrong," he said. "I saw Roger every day the last ten years. When you know a man that well, you can tell how things are at home, whether things are in the oven or the Mixmaster. Death hadn’t breathed down his neck yet; he wasn't running scared after his immortal youth, picking peaches in someone else's orchards. No, no, I swear, I'd bet my last dollar on it Roger---"

The doorbell rang behind him. The delivery boy had come up quietly onto the porch and was standing there with a telegram in his hand.

"Fortnum?"

Cynthia snapped on the hall light as he ripped the envelope open and smoothed it out for reading.

TRAVELING NEW ORLEANS. THIS TELEGRAM POSSIBLE OFFGUARD MOMENT.

YOU MUST REFUSE, REPEAT REFUSE, ALL SPECIAL DELIVERY PACKAGES. ROGER

Cynthia glanced up from the paper. "I don't understand. What does he mean?"

But Fortnum was already at the telephone, dialing swiftly, once. "Operator? The police, and hurry!"

At ten-fifteen that night the phone rang for the sixth time during the evening. Fortnum got it and immediately gasped. "Roger! Where are you?"

"Where am I, hell," said Roger lightly, almost amused. "You know very well where I am, you're responsible for this. I should be angry!"

Cynthia, at his nod, had hurried to take the extension phone in the kitchen. When he heard the soft click, he went on. "Roger, I swear I don't know. I got that telegram from you--"

"What telegram?" said Roger jovially. "I sent no telegram. Now, of a sudden, the police come pouring onto the southbound train, pull me off in some jerk-water, and I'm calling you to get them off my neck. Hugh, if this is some joke-"

"But, Roger, you just vanished!"

"On a business trip, if you can call that vanishing. I told Dorothy about this, and Joe."

"This is all very confusing, Roger. You're in no danger? Nobody's blackmailing you, forcing you into this speech?"

"I'm fine, healthy, free and unafraid."

"But, Roger, your premonitions?"

"Poppycock! Now, look, I'm being very good about this, aren’t I?"

"Sure, Roger--"

"Then play the good father and give me permission to go. Call Dorothy and tell her I'll be back in five days. How could she have forgotten?"

"She did, Roger. See you in five days, then?"

"Five days, I swear."

The voice was indeed winning and warm, the old Roger again. Fortnum shook his head. "Roger," he said, "this is the craziest day I've ever spent. You’re not running off from Dorothy? Good Lord, you can tell me."

"I love her with all my heart. Now here's Lieutenant Parker of the Ridgetown police. Goodbye, Hugh."

"Good---"

But the lieutenant was on the line, talking, talking angrily. What had Fortnum meant putting them to this trouble? What was going on? Who did he think he was? Did or didn't he want this so-called friend held or released?

"Released," Fortnum managed to say somewhere along the way, and hung up the phone and imagined he heard a voice call all aboard and the massive thunder of the train leaving the station two hundred miles south in the somehow increasingly dark night.

Cynthia walked very slowly into the parlor. "I feel so foolish," she said.

"How do you think I feel?"

"Who could have sent that telegram, and why?" He poured himself some Scotch and stood in the middle of the room looking at it.

"I'm glad Roger is all right," his wife said at last.

"He isn't," said Fortnum.

"But you just said----"

"I said nothing. After all we couldn't very well drag him off that train and truss him up and send him home, could we, if he insisted he was okay? No. He sent that telegram, but changed his mind after sending it. Why, why, why?" Fortnum paced the room, sipping the drink. "Why warn us against special-delivery packages? The only package we've got this year which fits that description is the one Tom got this morning..." His voice trailed off.

Before he could move, Cynthia was at the wastepaper basket taking out the crumpled wrapping paper with the special-delivery stamps on it.

The postmark read: NEW ORLEANS, LA. Cynthia looked up from it.

"New Orleans. Isn't that where Roger is heading right now? A doorknob rattled, a door opened and closed in Fortnum's mind. Another doorknob rattled, another door swung wide and then shut. There was a smell of damp earth.

He found his hand dialing the phone. After a long while Dorothy Willis answered at the other end. He could imagine her sitting alone in a house with too many lights on. He talked quietly with her a while, then cleared his throat and Said, "Dorothy, look. I know it sounds silly. Did any special-delivery packages arrive at your house the last few days?"

Her voice was faint. "No." Then: "No, wait. Three days ago. But I thought you knew! All the boys on the block are going in for it."

Fortnum measured his words carefully. "Going in for what?"

"But why ask?" she said. "There's nothing wrong with raising mushrooms, is there?"

Fortnum closed his eyes.

"Hugh? Are you still there?" asked Dorothy.

"I said there's nothing wrong with----"

"Raising mushrooms", said Fortnum at last. "No. Nothing wrong. Nothing wrong."

And slowly he put down the phone.

The curtains blew like veils of moonlight. The clock ticked. The after-midnight world bowed into and filled the bedroom. He heard Mrs. Goodbody's clear voice on this morning's air, a million years gone now.. He heard Roger putting a cloud over the sun at noon. He heard the police damning him by phone from down state. Then Roger's voice again, with the locomotive thunder hurrying him away and away, fading.

And, finally, Mrs. Goodbody's voice behind the hedge: "Lord, it grows fast!" "What does?" "The Marasmius oreades!" He snapped his eyes open.

He sat up. Downstairs, a moment later, he flicked through the unabridged dictionary.

His forefinger underlined the words: "Maraimius oreades; a mushroom commonly found on lawns in summer and early autumn..."

He let the book fall shut. Outside, in the deep summer night, he lit a cigarette and smoked quietly.

A meteor fell across space, burning itself out quickly. The trees rustled softly.

The front door tapped shut. Cynthia moved toward him in her robe.

"Can't sleep?"

"Too warm, I guess."

"It's not warm."

"No," he said, feeling his arms. "In fact, it's cold." He sucked on the cigarette twice, then, not looking at her, said, "Cynthia, what if..." He snorted and had to stop. "Well, what if Roger was right this morning. Mrs. Goodbody, what if she's right, too? Something terrible is happening. Like, well--" he nodded at the sky and the million stars "Earth being invaded by things from other worlds, maybe."

"Hugh..."

"No, let me run wild."

"It's quite obvious we're not being invaded, or we'd notice."

"Let's say we've only half noticed, become uneasy about something. What? How could we be invaded? By what means would creatures invade?"

Cynthia looked at the sky and was about to try something when he interrupted. "No, not meteors or flying saucers, things we can see. What about bacteria? That comes from outer space, too, doesn't it?"

"I read once, yes."

"Spores, seeds, pollens, viruses probably bombard our atmosphere by the billions every second and have done so for millions of years. Right now we're sitting out under an invisible rain. It falls all over the country, the cities, the towns, and right now, our lawn."

"Our lawn?"

"And Mrs. Goodbody's. But people like her are always pulling weeds, spraying poison, kicking toadstools off their grass. It would be hard for any strange life form to survive in cities. Weather's a problem, too. Best climate might be South: Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana. Back in the damp bayous they could grow to a fine size."

But Cynthia was beginning to laugh now. "Oh, really, you don't believe, do you, that this Great Bayou or Whatever Greenhouse Novelty Company that sent Tom his package is owned and operated by six-foot-tall mushrooms from another planet?"

"If you put it that way, it sounds funny."

"Funny! It's hilarious!" She threw her head back, deliciously.

"Good grief!" he cried, suddenly irritated. "Something's going on! Mrs. Goodbody is rooting out and killing Marasmius oreades. What is Marasmius oreades? A certain kind of mushroom. Simultaneously, and I suppose you'll call it coincidence, by special delivery, what arrives the same day? Mushrooms for Tom! What else happens? Roger fears he may soon cease to be! Within hours, he vanishes, then telegraphs us, warning us not to accept what? The special delivery mushrooms for Tom! Has Roger's son got a similar package in the last few days? He has! Where do the packages come from? New Orleans! And where is Roger going when he vanishes? New Orleans! Do you see, Cynthia, do you see? I wouldn't be upset if all these separate things didn't lock together! Roger, Tom, Joe, mushrooms, Mrs. Goodbody, packages, destinations, everything in one pattern!"

She was watching his face now, quieter, but still amused. "Don't get angry."

"I'm not!" Fortnum almost shouted. And then he simply could not go on. He was afraid that if he did he would find himself shouting with laughter too, and somehow he did not want that. He stared at the surrounding houses up and down the block and thought of the dark cellars and the neighbor boys who read Popular Mechanics and sent their money in by the millions to raise the mushrooms hidden away. Just as he, when a boy, had mailed off for chemicals, seeds, turtles, numberless salves and sickish ointments. In how many million American homes tonight were billions of mushrooms rousing up under the ministrations of the innocent?

"Hugh?" His wife was touching his arm now. "Mushrooms, even big ones, can't think, can't move, don't have arms and legs. How could they run a mail-order service and 'take over' the world? Come on, now, let's look at your terrible fiends and monsters!"

She pulled him toward the door. Inside, she headed for the cellar, but he stopped, shaking his head, a foolish smile shaping itself somehow to his mouth. "No, no, I know what we’ll find. You win. The whole thing's silly. Roger will be back next week and we'll all get drunk together. Go on up to bed now and I'll drink a glass of warm milk and be with you in a minute."

"That's better!" She kissed him on both cheeks, squeezed him and went away up the stairs.

In the kitchen, he took out a glass, opened the refrigerator, and was pouring the milk when he stopped suddenly.

Near the front of the top shelf was a small yellow dish. It was not the dish that held his attention, however. It was what lay in the dish.

The fresh-cut mushrooms. He must have stood there for half a minute, his breath frosting the air, before he reached out, took hold of the dish, sniffed it, felt the mushrooms, then at last, carrying the dish, went out into the hall. He looked up the stairs, hearing Cynthia moving about in the bedroom, and was about to call up to her, "Cynthia, did you put these in the refrigerator?" Then he stopped. He knew her answer. She had not.

He put the dish of mushrooms on the newel-upright at the bottom of the stairs and stood looking at them. He imagined himself in bed later, looking at the walls, the open windows, watching the moonlight sift patterns on the ceiling.

He heard himself saying, Cynthia? And her answering, Yes? And him saying, There is a way for mushrooms to grow arms and legs. What? she would say, silly, silly man, what? And he would gather courage against her hilarious reaction and go on, What if a man wandered through the swamp, picked the mushrooms and ate them... ?

No response from Cynthia.

Once inside the man, would the mushrooms spread through his blood, take over every cell and change the man from a man to a Martian? Given this theory, would the mushroom need its own arms and legs? No, not when it could borrow people, live inside and become them. Roger ate mushrooms given him by his son. Roger became something else. He kidnapped himself. And in one last flash of sanity, of being himself, he telegraphed us, warning us not to accept the special-delivery mushrooms. The 'Roger' that telephoned later was no longer Roger but a captive of what he had eaten. Doesn't that figure, Cynthia, doesn't it, doesn't it?

No, said the imagined Cynthia, no, it doesn't figure, no, no, no....

There was the faintest whisper, rustle, stir from the cellar.

Taking his eyes from the bowl, Fortnum walked to the cellar door and put his ear to it. "Tom?" No answer. "Tom, are you down there? " No answer. "Tom?"

After a long while, Tom's voice came up from below. "Yes, Dad?"

"It's after midnight," said Fortnum, fighting to keep his voice from going high. "What are you doing down there?" No answer.

"I said--"

"Tending to my crop," said the boy at last, his voice cold and faint.

"Well, get the hell out of there! You hear me?"

Silence.

"Tom? Listen! Did you put some mushrooms in the refrigerator tonight? If so, why?"

Ten seconds must have ticked by before the boy replied from below, "For you and Mom to eat, of course."

Fortnum heard his heart moving swiftly and had to take three deep breaths before he could go on.

"Tom? You didn't ... that is, you haven't by any chance eaten some of the mushrooms yourself, have you?"

"Funny you ask that," said Tom. "Yes. Tonight. On a sandwich. After supper. Why?"

Fortnum held to the doorknob. Now it was his turn not to answer. He felt his knees beginning to melt and he fought the whole silly senseless fool thing. No reason, he tried to say, but his lips wouldn't move.

"Dad?" called Tom, softly from the cellar. "Come on down." Another pause. "I want you to see the harvest."

Fortnum felt the knob slip in his sweaty hand. The knob rattled. He gasped.

"Dad?" called Tom softly.

Fortnum opened the door. The cellar was completely black below. He stretched his hand in toward the light switch. As if sensing this from somewhere, Tom said, "Don’t. Light's bad for the mushrooms."

He took his hand off the switch. He swallowed. He looked back at the stair leading up to his wife. I suppose, he thought, I should go say goodbye to Cynthia. But why should I think that! Why, in God's name, should I think that at all? No reason, is there? None.

"Tom?" he said, affecting a jaunty air. "Ready or not, here I come!"

And stepping down in darkness, he shut the door.