

A Note About The Text: In this tale you will read about a woman who enjoys 'mushroom tea'. I'd like to clarify that this is not a sort of 'ganja', but that this character enjoys literal tea made from non-hallucinogenic mushrooms.

“THE GNOME WHO DIDN'T SHOW”

By Alexander G. Tozzi

I like to drink mushroom tea after a hard day's work. Most people's faces turn green when they hear a girl like me grinds up morels, web-caps and toadstools into a fine powder, mixing it with a wooden spoon into a strong, potent brew. But the gnome understands, and often shares a cup with me.

I'm drinking some now, waiting for the gnome to arrive. He lives in a tree stump out behind the eggplant garden, and each night he comes in and plays a game of chess. Those games of chess are the high points of my days, which are spent collating data and popping a dozen pills for my dementia.

No, I'm not an old hag, just a typical girl in her mid-twenties. Dementia just struck me a little early, I guess, and those orange pill bottles that litter my kitchen table are a grim reminder that one's mental being should never be taken for granted.

Like so much mushroom powder. . . *I take a sip*. . . it can dissolve as quickly as. . . well, the gnome.

He should have been here by now. Looking outside, the sky is turning crimson; purple clouds are puffed into glowering faces, making me want to hide behind the corduroy curtains. I don't, keeping my eyes focused on the stump behind the garden. Usually I can see a dim light in the splinters, telling me the gnome is there.

There's no light, just. . . *I squint* . . . are those centipedes? It's very far away, but it's hard to miss when serpentine insects are invading your best friend's home-even if it is a dried up old

tree stump.

Leaving my tea on a bookcase, I grab a scarf and rush out. It's crisp, and I waste no time in tying the scarf, fairly leaping across the garden. One of the eggplants trips me and I go flying into the black loam. My head is aching now. . . it often happens before a dementia attack; kind of like tension before arthritis.

Lying in the damp dirt my eyes are level with the tree stump. It's knobby and brittle at the same time, and I can see the only door being attacked by a centipede, it's mandibles clicking like iron talons.

The gnome!

I half crawl half run to the stump, and with a scream I claw at the knobby, brittle wood, brushing the centipedes away. Some of them burn my fingers, biting into me with their mandibles. They sting like searing coals, but the gnome is in danger, and I know that my pain is nothing compared to what they could do to a small fellow like him.

The centipedes are scurrying away now. I'm leaning against the stump, my black hair mussed in front of my sweaty brow. My fingers are burning as though they're stuck in my mushroom tea, and my head ache is starting to ebb. That's good. . . Maybe I don't need a pill after all.

My hands touch where the door should be, and I gasp. It's not there.

A dagger pierces my heart and I examine the stump from all angles, all sides. That familiar door, made to look like a crosshatch has vanished; not a trace is left. I try squinting through the splinters but can't see for the darkness. Maybe the gnome is asleep? I pound on the stump like a drum, call through the splinters. There is no answer, and the gnome does not show.

Above me the crimson sky is turning dark, and the glowering clouds start to grumble. A thunderstorm, I realize, and know that I can't stay out here much longer. One last knock, one last call, and the gnome still does not show.

With a sigh I go back inside. My tea is lukewarm, so I go to

warm it. As the microwave hums like an electronic carousel, I wonder what happened to the gnome? Were the centipedes magic-turned his home back a common tree stump? Did he tire of our games and abandon me? Or maybe I confused the garden stump with another one. . . .

While the microwave continues its calliope, I see the bottles of pills on the table. Struggling with the cap, they clatter on the table. I pop one before I scoop them up. And then, as the microwave dings, and the rain starts to shower, I realize something. . . there's no such thing as gnomes.

THE END