



ILLUSTRATION BY RUSS NICHOLSON

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POOL OF MEMORY

A Story of Morlock Ambrosius

By JAMES ENGE

Your soul must say to the guardians: "I am a child of the Earth and of Starry Heaven, but my nation is the Sky. You yourselves know this! I am withered with thirst; I'm dying. Quickly, give me the cold water flowing from the pool of Memory."

—prophecy of Orpheus

HIS eyes like gray stones lay lifeless in the river of his tears. He stumbled down the cluttered road as if he had forgotten how to walk on his uneven legs. In fact he had forgotten much, including his name. He stood there, at the entrance to the little town, blinking at the blank-eyed, happy people wandering the streets. At last he summoned the awareness to ask someone, "Where is this place?"

The someone answered him in a language he did not know.

He also didn't know enough to be concerned; he just walked on to the next person, a dark-skinned woman with golden eyes and hair. She was sitting on the steps outside a dilapidated house. Had he remembered anything about the world and its people, he would have found her unusually beautiful; at the moment she was just someone to talk to.

"Where is this place?" he asked the darkly golden woman.

"Not sure," she replied, with a dazzling smile. "Don't you know?"

"No."

She laughed at that. "That's stupid," she said. "You just came here and you don't know where here is!"

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Not sure," she said. "They call me Goldie, so that's what I call myself. What's your name?"

He was not prepared for this appalling question, which seemed to him very unfair. He stuttered, "I am—am—Am—Am—Am—" and ground slowly to a halt.

"Well," she said doubtfully, "I'll just call you Am for short."

Am thought this was wrong, but he couldn't think of anything righter. He sat down next to Goldie on the steps of the house. His feet stopped hurting and he was surprised by that. As long as he could remember, his feet had hurt. Now he knew he could fix that by sitting down. He made a mental note to remember it.

"Why are you crying?" Goldie asked.

"I'm not."

"You *were*. Your face is all over tears and snot. Why were you crying?"

"No idea," he admitted cheerfully, wiping off some of the tears etc. "Why do you ask so many questions?" he asked, before she could ask him another.

"I like to know things. I know where I live, and where Burroom lives, and where to get food, and some other things too. I bet you don't know that much."

It was true, and only when she'd said that did he realize it.

"Let's go see Burroom," she said. "Then we'll get some food."

Burroom lived in the corner of a three-floor house that had collapsed in on itself. He was sitting on a dark greasy mat in a place where the shattered timber of the house had formed a tentlike structure. His hair was brown and tangled; his face was pale and vacant; his red eyes looked through them and past them as they approached, focused on nothing at all.

Am's fingers itched with the urge to fix the house somehow... or destroy it. He didn't like to see broken things. He didn't know why.

Goldie was bothered, too, for different reasons. She couldn't get Burroom to notice her at first. At last, after standing in front of him and shouting his name, she got him to look at her and say, "Oh. Hi, Goldie."

"We're going to get some food," Goldie said. "Come with us."

"Oh. I don't eat anymore."

"Don't be dumb. Everybody eats."

With this and other arguments, Goldie tried to sway him, but he just sat there—not disagreeing, not fighting, not anything.

"Okay, we'll bring by some food for you later," Goldie said.

Burroom didn't even shrug. He just sat there as they walked away.

"I don't like to see that," Goldie remarked to Am. "People who do that sometimes don't get better."

"And then?"

"They die."

"And then?"

"The mouths come. The mushrooms grow."

"Will that happen to Burroom?"

"Of course not!"

"Why not?"

Goldie shrugged. "It never has."

Food, it turned out, was mushrooms. Am liked mushrooms; he knew it as soon as he saw them. But he didn't like where these ones were growing: a heap of rotting bodies underneath a canopy of leaves in the town square.

The heap was surrounded by man-high plants with dark spiny stems; from them extended the ivy-like limbs that wove together to provide shade for the mushrooms. At the foot of each stem was a straggly halo of mushy brown leaves. At the top of each stem was a pair of thick petals, very like lips, gleaming in poisonous green. Am didn't find them unusual, since he had nothing in his memory to compare them to, but he didn't like them. And he really didn't like it when some of the mouth-plants turned toward them and opened their lips, revealing the narrow dark gullet within.

"Let's go somewhere else," he said to Goldie.

"There's nowhere else. This is where food is."

"I don't like those things."

"What? The mouths?" Goldie gaped in surprise at the sinister plants, who gaped hungrily back at her. "They won't hurt you."

"How do you know?"

"They never have."

"How do you know?"

Goldie took the question seriously. "I suppose I don't," she said candidly, after a few moments. "But that's where the food is. I've never seen the mouths harm anyone. If you want to look elsewhere for food, go ahead."

Am was reluctant to leave her company, and he was hungry. He followed her through the rows of mouth-plants and they each gathered an armful of mushrooms from the corpse heap. It was pretty horrible, plucking mushrooms up from between the gray meaty fingers of a corpse, but no more horrible than the mouth-plants, or the painful hollow in his brain where his memories should be, the nagging feeling that he'd forgotten something important.

When they had as many mushrooms as they could carry, Goldie led the way to a thin clear stream on the high side of town, coming through the tall thorny hedge that seemed to surround the whole place. They rinsed the mushrooms clean, ate them, and washed them down with more water from the stream.

"You look funny there, a mushroom eating mushrooms," Goldie remarked.

"What?"

"Your skin so pale, like a mushroom, I mean. You're kind of hunched over, too."

Am couldn't deny the fact of his twisted shoulders, but he looked at his arm, burned brown by much exposure to the sun, and then hers. "Compared to you, I guess," he said at last.

Goldie looked confused. "Sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. For a second you looked paler than you are. Younger, too. I don't know why I thought that."

They munched their wet fungus in not-uncomfortable silence.

They went back that night to a house that Goldie said was hers, although there was no furniture or any sign that anyone had lived there for a long time. Goldie wrapped herself around Am, crooked shoulders and all, and afterwards fell asleep on the floor, as if they'd been married for a hundred years—which was true, in a way, although neither of them knew it.

The next few days passed in a golden fog, at least for Am. Maybe I should tell you all about them, but I'm not here to lie to you: they were all pretty much like the first one.

One thing happened, though: Burroom died. Goldie and Am went with a handful of mushrooms to his house and he was sitting there in his tent of ruined timber, his face as gray and cold as the mushrooms who would presently be feeding on it.

There was a mouth-plant already almost fully grown by the dead body. The next day, when they were going to get mushrooms, they saw it bent over, dragging Burroom's corpse to the pile, wriggling the rotten brown leaves at its base like octopus legs to move down the street. Goldie didn't say anything about it, so Am didn't, but he felt strange and sad.

Then a day came when Goldie fell silent. She didn't want to go for a walk by the thorn bush, or wade in the stream, or get food, or sleep together, or anything.

"Are you sad about Burroom?" Am asked.

"What's Burroom?" Goldie said absently, not looking at him.

Am realized that what had happened to Burroom was happening now to Goldie. And he had to wonder if it was also happening to him: he was frightened and upset about losing his only friend, but somehow the feeling was muted, wrapped in fog and cotton.

He ran all the way to the food pile and picked mushrooms for Goldie, but when he returned with them, wet and shining from the stream, she would not speak or listen to him at all.

He was too frightened to eat. He sat down on the step with her, as if he could keep her company as she set out on her long journey. But he couldn't keep her company. She didn't even know he was there.

On the other side of the doorstep, a spiky, green stem was growing. Pierced by an intuition sharper than any thorn, he went to look at it. It was a mouth-plant, just about knee-high. It was growing there so that it could carry her dead body to the corpse heap.

Anger kindled in his mind, a bright fire dispelling the fog, burning the cotton. He grabbed the mouth plant and tried to pull it up from the ground. He succeeded in lifting the scraggly brown leaves off the ground, but there were long, pale stringy roots that would not come loose from the earth.

That was when Am learned that the mouth-plants had teeth: sharp, jagged, greenblack ridges that extruded from the shining green lips. They fastened onto his right forearm, ripping through the cloth to tear into his flesh.

He was too ignorant to be startled or afraid. He pummeled the green lips savagely with his left hand as he continued to try and pull the stem free from its roots with his right.

The jagged teeth broke a vein in his arm and Am's red fire-bright blood sprayed out, setting the mouth-plant on fire. Am shouted with surprise—he had not known blood could do that—and the plant-beast was even more dismayed. It struggled to break free, but its straggling brown leaf-feet couldn't reach the ground and presently it was limp in his hand, smoldering with stinking green smoke.

Am dropped it in the street and put one foot on it, in case it was faking, as he tore a strip from his cloak and quickly bound up his wound with it. His fingers knew what to do without him thinking about it. As he wrapped the makeshift bandage he noticed that his skin was already crisscrossed with scars. The mouth-plant was not the first monster to take a dislike to him, perhaps. Somehow he was pleased. He had survived those other things; maybe he would survive this too.