

Moya Costello

MYCOLOGY

I scan the map. Martin's holding it, discussing the driving route with Jack. It's Jack's map. Jack collects teaspoons from his travels and still has his first body-shirt.

If I'm excluded from the discussion of the driving route, I don't mind. I haven't actually tried to participate. I could navigate; it's just that it would take me some time, more time than it would Martin or Jack, to work out the route. I don't drive. Neither does Jack. But he does play games of strategy with Martin on boards and computers. And if I worked out the driving route, it would then be double-checked by Martin.

Besides, I sense a pattern will readily form in the day, as if pavers were to be placed in geometric shapes just ahead of my every footfall. I am standing outside events, watching them unfold, like a director shooting her film. Things are happening as if they were the final take of scenes that have been planned out and well rehearsed. Why just last night, Martin and I had watched a video of *The Name of the Rose*, after regularly checking the shelves of the video hire to find only its absence.

This morning I ask Jack for a copy of the book. He has bound copies of *Phantom* comics and *Choice*, the consumers' magazine. "I'll give you my copy, if you can get me a rice-paper edition of *Lord of the Rings*," he says.

"Just because I review books," I say, "doesn't mean I'll come across a rice-paper edition of Tolkien".

It's late autumn — perhaps too late: we are to spend half a Saturday on a mushroom search. Second Valley sounds a place of magic from a storybook, a place of elves, fairies and toadstools. It is, perhaps, that valleys, and forests, are land formations that equate with secrecy and ritual. According to the map, Second Valley is down the leg of the peninsula to a small bound foot of land that dips its toe into the gulf waters.

"Wear your wellies!" declares Jack as Sarah has arrived with her pair on. But Jack's declaration is only part of the role-play, the game, the mythology of hunting for mushrooms in damp and soggy places, for, like

Martin and me, Jack doesn't have any wellies and instead wears sturdy shoes. Sarah has come down from the hills where there's an easy sense of living in the bush, to meet up with us urban plain dwellers. And I can't imagine any damp and soggy place in Adelaide or its surrounds that would affect our footfall — except after very heavy and recent rain. Rain is rare enough and heavy rain, heavy enough to make for squelch, rarer still.

By mid-day we're hurtling down the road, crowded into the car's capsule, held, it seems, by some centrifugal force on this little planet hurtling through space.

Our purpose is specific but clandestine, so we feel ourselves to be visitors from another planet in this ordinary daylight on an earth day. We'll be landing soon — like Doctor Who — in some strange but familiar country. Though time travellers, and therefore supertechnocrats, we can nevertheless be foragers in the forest too.

We pick up Michael as our scout because he has a “nose”. He's quiet in the back of the car. It's not that he's sullen; it's just that some men in the games group are unnerved by the way women disturb the balance of the usual all-male group.

We're hoping Michael won't fail us. Yet we'll all contribute what resources we can draw on: sight, intellect, instinct. Since no-one seems to have certain knowledge, I'm confident I can contribute equally. At least I'm at liberty to ask questions, as we all do, that set the parameters of our investigation:

Where are they?

How will we know them?

Who's had them before?

Jack's zeroed in on pine forests — that's where he's found them before. Martin disputes. “What we should be looking for is a cow paddock with a row of Eucalyptus,” he says. “But that was in Tasmania,” he continues, thinking out loud, remembering his hippie past. “The optimum conditions were probably different there.”

“I was hoping it would be raining,” says Jack, dreaming of damp, of mist and fog and fungus.

“Why?” Martin laughs. “Do you think they'll pop out of the ground?”

David Suzuki's on the car radio. He's explaining exponential growth — why we don't need it. We have a way of looking at the world that sees things as useful only if they're useful to human beings. We don't recognise the “interconnectedness” of things. When he took his daughter to

the zoo, she pointed to particular animals and asked if they were rare or endangered species. They may not be around when she grows up. Already there are many she will never see — they've disappeared from the earth and the skies.

"There's a man who goes round the world planting trees," says Jack. "He's 93."

"He's dead," says Sarah.

Later we tell Jack that Maria Callas is dead too. There's no need for further comment on the disappearance of species.

The first mushrooms we see are in one of the main towns for the area, Myponga. They're concrete, huddled together with the gnomes in a gnome sale.

We suspect that the mushrooms will be on a private property. In the town we see a land sale advertised.

"I'd like to buy some land down here," says Sarah.

Jack suggests we go and check out the mushrooms on these vacant blocks. There follows some discussion about distracting the real-estate agent from our illegitimate purpose.

"Maybe they have Neighbourhood Watch in Second Valley," says Martin. "'We've sighted them in the field. Over.' 'Hold them till we get there. Over.' 'Halt!' 'Look here, we're ... we're 'cologists of some kind.'"

What's the name of the study of fungi? Mycology. Mycologists. We see "Myco Carpets", which we read as "Myco Carpets", painted across a shop window. This is a sign, we say.

Jack looks out onto the road. "They're all druggies in those cars following us," says Jack. "They've got beards, long hair and glazed eyes."

"Well," says Martin, "they've come out for the occasion, just like the mushrooms."

Sarah says we should have dressed suitably. "We could have dug out our flares and worn Afro wigs."

Jack says he went to a wedding recently. "The only pants I had were flares. I had to stand still throughout the reception to prevent them flapping."

In the pine forest, mushrooms are everywhere in infinite variety as if abundance acts to confuse and deter. They're like the death of stars, a short bright burst of life. They're strange fruits, living presences: they speak of other worlds, other times. The bright reds spotted white are straight out of picture books of fairies and elves. The big, flat-topped yellows look like parts for electric sanders.

The forest consumes us. The forest floor is like sponge rubber. We're not on solid ground. If the needles don't hold our next steps, we could go sinking through to the earth's centre. It's so quiet we hear our own thoughts as other voices. We could be lulled into a dream and stay here forever. We drift apart and wander alone; it's a long time before there's the call to regroup.

Our scout is lost, reluctant to be found. The forest seems vast, more vast than it really is. Our voices trail. How would we even begin to look for him in this labyrinth of growth and decay?

Upon regrouping we decide that this is not the place — it's been a false trail. So we're back on the road again. Jack is looking out for clues. And there's the spot ahead of us, according to Jack, with its individual markers: the corner, the only deli, the fork in the road, the hill, the pine forest.

We spread out for a hunt, five metres apart within sight of each other — our purpose is clear: to get what we came for. I've asked for a description of the mushrooms, but like a religious experience or quantum physics, no-one can explain: it's the experience — we'll know them when we see them. Our focus is so set now that our search in the forest will be a kind of meditation.

I'm looking for formed nipples. And this is the place — for when I pick what seems like my 40th mushroom and press it with my thumb, almost instantaneously it turns blue. I press and press again: a child in response to a mechanical toy. And the stem and the cap turn blue. Sarah and I — the novices — discover them all at once. Sarah pulls some from her Japara. "She's growing them in her pockets!"

We gather what we can of what we see in the immediate area, for, like the curved line on a graph of a predictable plot, we have found what we came for when it is already late and time to go. The autumnal day has closed in around us and we have left the car exposed on a lonely road.

Propelled back to the city in our time capsule we are subdued, now our investigation has been wrapped up, the story closed. In the distance the sun is setting in orange and red over Adelaide. Briefly commenting on this is our only conversation, except for Martin who is still ebullient and therefore out of sync with the rest of us.

"So, after all that, it is nuclear war that got to us first," he booms lightheartedly behind the wheel of the car, "not environmental collapse".

I dip my head and begin to try to rub away the black stain on the skin around my thumbnail.