

## **Mushroom Zombies**

By Sophia Therriault

“Mushroom zombies.” Taylor slapped a piece of rolled up paper on the back of Alyssa’s chair. She swiveled to face him. She hadn’t heard him come in the room. He was wearing an open navy-blue koi kimono over a gray t-shirt and navy joggers. Somehow, even his loungewear was fashionable. He looked like he just strode off the runway, not out of his cave of a bedroom. Alyssa, on the other hand, wore a second-hand t-shirt from a lakeside resort she’d never been to. The resort was called Alyssa Islands Hotel and Spa.

“Yeah?” she asked. “What about them?”

“That’s gonna be my next book project.”

“Mushroom zombies?” Alyssa let the distaste hang heavy in her voice. She swiveled back around to face her over-crowded desk.

The desk was plain, a yard sale find. She’d scooted the massive solid pine thing all the way against the wall underneath her window. Because she lived in the attic, the window was on the slope of the ceiling, halfway between a window and a sky light. Impossible for curtains or blinds. Perfect for living by the sun. In the early afternoon, as the sun crept around this side of the house, the light shone through her open window on her mass of newspaper clippings and magazines like a spotlight illuminating a dancer.

She picked up her shears. “What happened to the . . . what was it? Laser . . .”

“Frogs. Laser frogs.” Taylor leaned against her desk, facing her open door as if he could see his novel playing out in the hallway. “It was good. It was going places, but I lost steam . . . I dunno.” He looked over his shoulder at the mess of clippings on her desk. “How’s this going?”

“I’m halfway to having my very own serial killer wall,” she said without looking up. She carefully cut around a photo of a diamond engagement ring. “I just need to put it all together with some red string.”

“That’s what you’re doing in here?”

“What did you think I was doing in here?”

Taylor shrugged. “Listen, I’ve got to take a break from writing. Why don’t you come get some coffee with me?”

“Most writers go to coffee shops to *do* their writing.”

“Most writers don’t actually write when they go to coffee shops. It’s all for show. Posturing in the literary community.”

“So maybe you should go do some posturing,” Alyssa said. She pressed one dot of glue on the back of the engagement ring before sticking it to a news article about a robbery. “If you go now, you might even snag a good window seat.”

Taylor shook his head. “For a muse, you’re really not that . . . musing.”

It wasn’t the first time he’d casually called her his muse. The first time, it took her off guard, like maybe living together was a bad idea. Like maybe he’d misunderstood what she’d said when she told him she just wanted to be friends. Now, the word sat undigested in her stomach.

“I’m pretty sure you’re the one who should be musing.” She flipped through the magazine.

“Fine. Spend your day off with your scissors instead of with your best friend. I’ll be down the street getting a half-calf mocha with cinnamon on top.”

She smiled as Taylor left her room, bounding down the stairs and whistling to himself as he walked outside and down the street. She couldn't place the tune. He was always making stuff up, though, so it probably wasn't something she could recognize. She waited until his whistling faded into the whispers of the aspen leaves quaking in the easy summer breeze that drifted through the open window.

The next afternoon, Alyssa was at work, cashiering at Perk Me Up, a local coffee house-slash-convenience store a block from campus. She wasn't a barista. She didn't know the first thing about making coffee. But people would come to her with their odd assortment of snacks and random household goods.

One guy who looked like he was stoned bought three Rice Krispy Treats, a family sized bag of Cool Ranch Doritos, a jar of olives, and a pack of AAA batteries. Alyssa passed each item under the scanner, stuffing them unceremoniously into a plastic bag that would eventually wash ashore on some distant sea.

"That'll be \$18," she said.

The high guy handed her a twenty. She made the change, counting back the two dollars, because counting back change took just a little longer than not counting back change, and she was willing to do anything to pass the time.

The guy left and the store was empty.

Alyssa started wiping down the counter—her go-to idle activity—and avoiding eye contact with the barista on duty (BOD). The cashiers and the baristas didn't commingle. It was as if standing four feet to the left in the same dead store working for the same store owner and making the same paycheck made the BOD superior to the lowly cashier. Like the title of

“barista” was something to be revered. As if wearing a coffee-stained apron gave someone a sense of authority over the store.

The BOD had a name tag that said Rachel but then again Alyssa’s name tag said Carrie, so even that information was suspect.

Rachel had her coffee brown hair tied up in a tight pony tail that was being held together with about a thousand bobby pins. Alyssa ran her fingers through her own short hair. She’d cut it off because she couldn’t stand having to keep track of hair ties all the time.

The bell over the door jingled and Alyssa’s lips were poised to say, “Welcome to Perk Me Up,” but before she could, she saw that it was Taylor waltzing in. He was wearing his green bamboo kimono with dark-green joggers and a white t-shirt.

“I thought you had work today,” Alyssa said.

He shrugged. “I took the day off. I almost quit, but I figured I need the paycheck.” Taylor worked at a boutique bookstore. As far as work went, it was perfect for him. He got to meet local authors who came to do readings, and he got to recommend books to strangers. When he’d first started, he’d called it his great big personal book club.

“I thought you liked the bookstore.”

“I did,” he said, picking an apple out of the bowl on the counter. “I don’t know. Being surrounded by books is like a lot of pressure to write one.”

“And yet, not everyone who works at a bookstore writes books.”

He laughed. “Fair enough. When do you get off today?”

“Three.”

He glanced at his phone. “Fifteen minutes?”

“Longest fifteen minutes of my life.”

Rachel scoffed.

Alyssa leaned over the counter, ignoring Rachel entirely. “Do you wanna hang out for fifteen minutes? I can walk you home.”

“Sure. Can’t write without my muse, anyway.”

She took the apple from his idle hands and put it back. “Are you still going to write about mushroom zombies?”

“Oh yeah. Think about it. A person inhales spores that enter their bloodstream through their lungs. A fungus grows in their brain and basically turns them into vegetables. Mushrooms grow out of their eye holes. Or should I say ocular cloaca? Nah, it doesn’t matter. But the fungus is sapient, and controls their body, making them crave other human brains.”

Alyssa laughed. “No. The fungus is sapient? No. Don’t do that.”

“How else would it work?”

“I don’t know.” Alyssa fiddled with the scanner. “Maybe the fungus doesn’t turn them into vegetables. It just shuts down all of the parts of their brain except the limbic system. Their animal instincts.”

Taylor pressed a reverent hand to his chest. “I forgot I was talking to a bona fide scientist.”

“Hardly.”

“Tell me, Dr. Alyssa, what part of the brain makes you want to eat other human brains?”

“The crazy part? I don’t know. Maybe the science doesn’t matter.” She wiped down the counters with her rag. Another customer walked through the doors. Taylor took a step back from the counter while she welcomed them and then he pretended to browse the candy aisle while the newcomer bought a 40 watt lightbulb.

“So say that the fungus turns them into a zombie. What then? Are they immortal?”

Taylor frowned. “I think most zombies are immortal. To kill them, you have to shoot them in the head. I know that much.”

“What about fungus zombies?”

“Mushroom zombies die by drying up,” he said.

Alyssa barked out a laugh that startled Rachel. “What do you mean, dry up?”

“That’s how mushrooms die. Low humidity can dry them out. I looked that up while Lightbulb Guy was here.”

“Who’s the scientist now?” Alyssa asked. Her replacement, a lanky boy named Tom, walked through the door. “That’s our cue. Hey, Tom.”

Tom’s name tag said Tom. She left the store in his semi-capable hands and strode out of there arm-in-arm with Taylor.

“So what happens to the mushroom zombies?” she asked.

“When they dry up?”

“No. In your story.”

Taylor shrugged. “I don’t know. They blow each other up, maybe?”

She rolled her eyes. “How are you *possibly* going to fit all of that plot into one tiny little book?”

He laughed, shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand. “I get it. I don’t have much to go on.”

“Then write about . . . a love story. Romeo and Juliet but it’s zombies. Mushroom zombie Romeo falls in love with human Juliet.”

“Tragic,” Taylor said with a far away expression. It wasn’t his lost-in-thought-because-of-book-idea face. It was a much harder, lonelier expression. One that even his muse wasn’t supposed to see.

Alyssa looked away. She watched the sky, the street, the passing cars. Was he thinking about her? Did he still want more from their friendship? She was afraid to ask. Afraid to open that wound again, just to see if it’s healed at all. Afraid that he’d say yes, he did like her still, and she’d have to reject him all over again. Afraid that their well-crafted friendship would wither away into a husk of acquaintanceship—Facebook friends, and nothing more. Afraid that he would always look at her like she was the moon and stars, and she would pretend not to notice. Afraid that the rest of their lives would be the same awkward dance, constantly avoiding the topic, but always orbiting each other, pulled together by gravity.

“Maybe one of the non-zombies is trying to figure out whether the mushroom zombies are still sapient,” she said.

“Hm?” Taylor’s face melted back to its casual, jovial stasis.

“Like maybe one of the zombies does something that makes them think that zombies have consciousness. Maybe it’s a moral question of whether they *should* kill the zombies.”

“They always kill the zombies,” he said.

“You don’t have to write what everybody else does.”

Taylor swished his kimono as they walked. “Maybe the scientists discover the painful truth after most of the zombies have already died. *That’s* a tragedy.”

“Of Shakespearian proportions.” Alyssa smiled. The muse was back on track.

She didn’t see Taylor for three days. They shared a house, but they did not share a schedule. He was up all night writing in his room, typewriter clacking loudly below as Alyssa

slept peacefully to the soothing rhythm of his creativity. She had the early morning shift three days in a row, working with the randomized BOD at the Perk Me Up. The BOD was ever-changing, but their nametag said Rachel two out of three times. The last time, just to see what would happen, Alyssa wore Rachel's nametag and left the BOD to be Carrie. The barista was not happy with the change. Her whole shift she was sighing and rolling her eyes. After work, Alyssa went home to find that Taylor was either asleep or at the bookstore, the door to his bedroom closed.

She sat in her room, highlighting key words in her newspaper articles, like *B&E* and *suspect* and *priceless artifacts*. Between highlighting and cutting, she looked out her window at the quaking aspen leaves, the clear blue of the sky, the high wispy clouds that floated by lazily in the heat.

When she finally did see Taylor in the kitchen, he looked tired and hollow, sitting at the counter hunched over a bowl of cereal with dark-purple bags under his eyes.

"How's the novel going?" She grabbed some orange juice from the fridge. She knew better than to ask him if he was just waking up or just going to bed.

He smiled his easygoing smile and said, "Ah. Return of the muse."

She bit her cheek to hide her cringe. "It sounds like you're doing pretty well without me. Actually writing, for once."

He shook his head, folding his kimono over his body. "I promise, without you, I'd be nowhere."

There it was again. The discomfort, the worry, the fear. She pushed it all away. "So did you use my idea?"

"Which idea?"



“The . . . one about the sapience.”

“Oh! Yes. And the Romeo and Juliet one. Well, sort of. There is a love story, but I’m not going to kill everyone at the end. I don’t think, anyway.”

“What happens at the end?”

Taylor winked. “We’ll know when we get there.”

“So what about the sapience?”

Taylor scooped some cereal into his mouth and chewed, tapping his index finger on his spoon. “Scientists are going to discover that the zombies are sentient, not sapient. They can feel pain, but there’s no real way to prove if something has a consciousness.”

Alyssa nodded. She poured herself a glass of orange juice and stuck two store brand frozen waffles into the toaster. “That’s true.”

“But there’s going to be a small group of people who think killing the zombies is wrong. I haven’t come up with a name for them yet, but they’re going to be a big faction in the story. Like PETA but for zombies.”

“Tying into the Romeo and Juliet arc? Someone from the PETA faction is in love with someone who kills zombies?”

“Precisely.” He glanced at the clock on the stove. “Christ. It’s already 9:30? I gotta go.”

“Work?”

He nodded, shoveling cereal into his mouth at an alarming rate.

“I’ll see you when you get home,” she said, turning back to her waffles.

“Thank you,” he said around a mouthful of cereal. “And I really mean it, Al. It’s good to have someone who . . .” he swallowed. “believes in my writing. You’ve always been supportive of me.”

A knot tied in Alyssa's stomach as the anxiety crept in. "What are friends for?"

"No, really." He pushed his cereal around his bowl. "There's no one else I'd rather . . ."

Share his life with? Live with? Talk about his stories with? Whatever was about to come out of his mouth, Alyssa didn't want to hear it. She turned back to her waffles, scooping some butter out of the dish and spreading it across their textured surface, letting the little square holes fill with the melted fat.

"I'm just happy to have you around," Taylor said.

Alyssa nodded, still facing away from him. What was she supposed to say? What *could* she say? That his friendship meant a lot to her? That she wasn't changing her mind? She picked up the syrup and tipped it over, watching the sticky viscous liquid ooze out of the bottle onto her waffles.

"Are you . . . okay?" he asked.

Alyssa plastered on a smile, turned to face him, and said, "Yeah. You don't want to be late for work."

He looked at her with a hard expression. The laughter was gone from his eyes as he studied her face, making some decision in his mind. Whatever he was deciding, she knew she'd hate it.

It's not that she wanted him to love her. Well, that's not entirely true. Some part of her didn't want him to move on. A selfish, backwards thinking, horrible part of her wanted him to love her. Even though it made her cringe, and her stomach clench, she enjoyed being the person around which he revolved. She enjoyed knowing that she was contributing to his mad genius. He was her best friend, and she didn't want to lose that any more than she wanted to change it.

Taylor slid off his stool and set his bowl in the sink. "You're right. I don't wanna be late."

“Taylor?” She looked down at his nice button-down and trousers hidden under his kimono. “I’m sorry.”

He nodded. “See ya.”

When he left, she took her waffles up to her room. She cleared off a place on her desk, stacking collaged newspaper articles on top of each other. She watched the street out her window, hoping to see a glimpse of him as he walked down the sidewalk.

There was something in her—some deep anxiety that grew like a tumor of emotion—that kept her from saying what she needed to say. But even if she could say it, how would she do it?

*Yes, Taylor. I am your muse. You cannot write without me.*

She poked her waffles with her fork.

*No, Taylor. You are the genius behind all of your work. Mushroom zombies was your idea. I just provided a sounding board against which you could hurl your ideas and thoughts. You are the genius and I am . . .*

Alyssa looked at her newspapers, her clipped photographs of jewelry, her highlighted suspect names and attached stock photos.

*I am an amateur with some magazines and Elmer’s glue.*