

The Mycelium Dream

Excerpt translated by *Jeremy Hill*

Fungal Dream Part 1

2051

Survive.

The most important thing is to survive.

It's the morning now, and I need to get up. To push on. To work. To do things.

Another day to be endured.

– Good morning. It's six forty-five. Seventeen degrees outside.

– Shut up, Anna.

– Shall I wake you in fifteen minutes?

– Go to hell! – I pull the pillow over my head.

– I can't.

Silence. Her voice is so sweet it makes me nauseous, but for some reason I never change the settings. Maybe I'm used to it. A virtual assistant is like a snake which doesn't drink the milk we offer it. – When do you want to get up?

I roll onto my back and finally open my eyes.

– Draw the curtains.

I hear the folds of cloth rustling along the rail like a model train riding to a better tomorrow.

The fact that my survival instinct was stronger than all my other senses or needs, I realized at the age of eight. My mother and I were watching an old film about a couple of lovers on a sinking ship. I was eating crisps and got genuinely angry at the main character who, instead of sitting safely in a dry, cozy lifeboat, rushed headlong into the flooded depths of the ship to rescue a man she'd only recently met, who later drowned anyway.

With that childish acuity that adults later lose, I realized there's no way I would have rescued any man. I am a person who doesn't care about love, duty, morality, or principles. The survival code written into my DNA is stronger than anything else. Even than life itself.

I asked my mum why the film character was acting so stupidly.

She looked at the screen thoughtfully, probably silently cursing her unfortunate choice of film. I'd asked her to show me something from her youth. I don't even know whether she'd already seen *Titanic* or had blindly stabbed her finger at the first film on the recommended list. – Maybe it's love, – she replied uncertainly, and I could detect from the sound of her voice that she'd have let him drown too.

How to stop? How to switch off survival mode? It's summer.

The summer house.

Before I let the remnants of the last dream go, before I look up at the sky and decide whether today will be sunny or overcast, I stretch my hand towards the bedside table and grab the screen.

Hmm, maybe I shouldn't read it.

All I will find is a series of problems that have to be solved – some important components stuck in production or a new war in the Congo, meaning a crisis of raw materials or another marketing executive has run off to the Chinese.

I sigh.

It's vacation now. I shouldn't be working. I should switch off completely and enjoy the peace and quiet, the pine trees, and the endless fucking rain.

But I don't know how not to work, and periods of unscheduled time frighten me more than the constant rise in eco-tax – someone has to pay for the genetically modified wolves, after all.

What do people do on vacation?

They sit on the beach like toads, eyes bulging with boredom, staring at the corpse of the Baltic Sea.

I shake off the thought and look through the messages.

Today there's no bad news, and that alone should inspire a fine start to the day, but my neck, which hurts when I lie down, reminds me that I'm getting older, and outside the window there's a thick gray haze.

Cold, wet, rainy summers.

– Why do I need this summer house if I don't know how to relax? – I groan, writhing in bed like a smart worm in the recycling bin.

I must get up.

– Anna, make some coffee.

– The nutritionist recommends you don't drink coffee.

– For God's sake, Anna, who cares what you think? – The guardian of morality has turned up. It's easy to talk when you can't smell fresh espresso yourself, and at least for an instant fill your inner void.

The VA is so vacuous, it's overflowing with information of no use to anyone. Yet over time they become our closest friend. What does this say about modern society? I bury my face in my pillow, trying to pretend I'm not here.

– It's my duty to remind you of the principles of healthy living. – I'm not sure how a VA can be offended, but Anna often seems pissed off with me.

I get out of bed and flinch unpleasantly when I feel the cold touch of the stone floor. Today I desperately need coffee. To hell with Anna and a healthy diet.

I go down to the ground floor and make a double espresso because Anna has turned on the machine all the same.

I'm strictly forbidden to drink black coffee on an empty stomach because it upsets my digestion for the entire day and is often followed by terrible bouts of diarrhea. But there's nothing I can do – it's simply impossible to resist the morning call of an espresso. And a second and a third.

As my therapist says, I just like to torture myself. All the trillion little me's, which

scream and yell when I pour a thick, bitter, sticky dose of caffeine over them. Fucking fungi and bacteria, why can't you make me happy?

Though I'm not sure I want to be happy. Maybe just surviving is enough for me.

On the rare mornings when I'm not stressed and allow myself to believe that the world can be good, on those mornings, I drink a vitamin shake specially balanced for my inner society, which is supposed to make the tiny me's feel good at the start of the day, to calm them down and persuade them not to cause any stress.

But it simply doesn't work. Sadly, I and my inner society are not a harmonious whole.

Ever since existential human theory proved that we are symbiotic beings between our inner society in the gut and the mammalian body, a new field of health has emerged to help us establish a deeper relationship with our fungus. But I and my self have been angry with each other since childhood, and no vitamin shake will help us.

A healthy fungus is a healthy person, so the consultants say who create nutritional plans to keep the gut's inhabitants happy.

Every month I send a piece of my shit for testing, and always the same encouraging reply comes back – there's not much you need to get along with each other, you just need to eat more healthily, not to drink coffee, not to forget your vitamin shakes, and avoid rehydrated food and alcohol.

I start the first week of every month full of hope, but my patience quickly runs out and I can't resist the temptation to drown those disgusting, angry, and disloyal animals in coffee and wine.

I go out onto the balcony and see a porpoise sunbathing on the shore. They have bred uncontrollably. They appear in huge numbers everywhere, and they're still multiplying. The National Park's Clean-up Program isn't even halfway through, but it seems to me that it's getting too crowded here – dolphins, langoustines, bison, creatures of all sizes, and hair, feathers, and scales, which have no intention of respecting the set boundaries of private property. In the evenings, wolves howl. You have to carry ultrasonic whistles, even though environmentalists say that all wolves have had their D423T gene suppressed and they don't pose a danger to humans. But somehow, it's uncomfortable to see green eyes in the dark when you're walking back from the beach in the evening.

It's uncomfortable, but what are you going to do? We all live together now – wolves, foxes, moose, bears, and us. Only the cows and sheep are gone. Maybe they're living on the islands? My friends' kids have never seen a chicken in their lives, and I never saw a wolf in the woods when I was growing up. Aaah! Today I feel so old.

In the distance, a glimpse of sun peeks through the clouds, caressing the skin with its slanting ray and igniting a barely perceptible will to live. I feel a little better.

Suddenly, the lagoon is lit by the sun and becomes so blue that I have to squint.

I start to think what kind of day today will be, what I will do. I can't help but plan. My life coach advises me to let time flow by itself, but every time I yield to spontaneity, it has a tragic end.

At nine o'clock, my workout.

At ten, I'll take a bath, laser my facial skin, put on a red clay mask, and read the news while soaking in hot water. Does that count as time off?

Between eleven and one, I'll answer my priority messages and look through documents.

Lunch at one. I always order it by cormorant-drone from a restaurant in Klaipėda, so now I need to decide what I'm going to eat and dispatch the order. I spend a long time staring at the menu on the screen and can't decide between what is healthy and what I want.

The wind is picking up.

A flock of birds flies over the horizon. I look closely to see if they are birds or cargo drones. They're birds after all.

And then... I almost choke when I suddenly remember why, since the first moment, an invisible but heavy leaden fog has been hanging over me – my mother is coming today.

How could I forget? I promised to pick her up from the boat station on Pervalka Pier. She's due to arrive on the three o'clock run.

Panic sets in. I need to go and check if the Beetle is charged because I keep parking it carelessly in the yard and forgetting to connect it to the wireless platform. When I get in to go somewhere, it starts beeping like a hysterical chicken and refuses to budge.

I need to check the fridge – do I have any food for breakfast? My mother still believes that breakfast is the most important meal of the day and, for as long as I can remember, has religiously eaten the same breakfast at seven each morning: a hundred grams of Greek yoghurt with berries or fruit and buttered banana toast. Eight o'clock on weekends.

It makes my stomach churn to think how pathetic and old-fashioned this ritual of hers is. No matter how much I convince her of the achievements of modern science, she flatly refuses to try balanced breakfast shakes designed for the kings of the gut. She even refuses to be tested, although I have offered to pay.

I don't even need to ask Anna or go to the fridge. I know for a fact that I have no yoghurt or banana bread.

I look up. The wind has blown away all the clouds, and now clear blue sky stretches over the lagoon, and the water is rippling idyllically in the sun.

But that will no longer rescue the day, so I make some more coffee and listen contentedly to the gurgling and grumbling in my stomach.

With trembling hands, I click on the food order on the screen, and in my panic, I buy too much. Strawberries. Peaches. Kimchi. Pickled vegetables. A loaf of banana bread and almost a liter of yoghurt. By the time the drone arrives, I'll have to get out the right size dishes and containers. I don't even know if I have that many.

Damn. When Mum leaves, I'll have to put everything in the compost bins. I hope I don't get fined for dumping too much waste for a one-person household.

It's so lazy of me to fill out this order. Sometimes I miss physical supermarkets, when, without a thought, you could automatically buy as much food as you wanted, and no one punished you if you threw something away. But there are no more shopping malls like those in my childhood. After the war, when disposable packaging was banned, we were all too lazy to go to the shops carrying bags with containers, so the big supermarkets became mere ghosts on the streets for a while and then naturally disappeared. All that's left are small neighborhood shops where you can borrow a box if you fancy a cake.

My mother's arrival plunges me into childhood memories.

Pull yourself together, Upé.

I sigh. I have to put my jars and bottles in a box, which a drone will come to pick up in ten minutes and then use to bring my purchases. No spontaneity. Every bit of food shopping has to be planned in advance, especially in Pervalka. But I don't like spontaneity, so why am I complaining like an old slipper about there being no more cows, which used to stink to high heaven, and no more shopping malls, which were the most boring thing in the world? I still wouldn't go to one even if it were round the corner.

What am I going to cook for dinner?

Maybe fish on the grill? I've never used the charcoal grill left by the previous owners. It shouldn't be difficult.

Will I be in time to order fresh fish and have it flown in from the nearest platform? The nearest one that produces class A is near Skuodas. It's not far at all. They have sturgeon, trout, and even those strange fish from the Amazon River.

Hmm.

I don't even notice how time is passing.

I go out onto the terrace and look around the grounds – the gardener tidied them up yesterday. The grass is cut, the flower beds watered, the gazebo free of cobwebs. I hope Mum likes it. It's a simple but large garden with pine trees.

We haven't seen each other for almost a year.

I go back into the kitchen, wondering which of the guest bedrooms to put her in. Suddenly I realize that I haven't set foot there since I bought the summer house, and my heart is stabbed by a sharp feeling of guilt. Four bedrooms, of which I use only one. And that rarely.

In fact, I've only spent three weekends in Neringa in the last year and a half, and this is the first vacation I've resided here for two whole weeks.

Not because I haven't wanted to. It's just that I've been very busy.

At least, that's what I try to tell myself. I only have two gears. Either I'm working, or I'm tired from working and dream of quiet time for myself – no running, no rushing. No noise. Just me and my thoughts.

The problem is that my thoughts and feelings are always conspiring against me, and whenever I'm resting, they keep reminding me that I'm wasting my time, so that, instead of lying in the bath, I could be doing something useful – replying to emails, sorting out the business or at least learning something new.

And when I follow these voices and immerse myself in work, when I allow myself to forget everything in the world and just work, work, work, work and even plan strategy sessions in my dreams, then my guilty conscience screams that I have this summer house, whose potential I'm not exploiting.

The guilty conscience is the snake that always has something to say.

Often, before I go to sleep, it whispers that I'm a monster who never finds time to visit my mother.

But the truth is that Mum doesn't really press to be visited. She never writes first or offers to meet. Sometimes I think that if I didn't call to interrupt whole months of silence, she would just forget I existed.

I am used to being forgotten. To being invisible. I don't expect anything more than to survive. To endure the days, to endure the loneliness. To close my eyes to such luxuries as dreams, happiness, emotional security, or inner peace. All this is for other, privileged inhabitants of Earth – all that's left for me is to stand stoically in the face of suffering and not show how much it hurts.

When I first saw the thatched roof of the summer house, its spacious terrace and sunlit kitchen, I had a vision of a peaceful life – Mum and I drinking real wine in front of the fire, smiling and having a good time, as if we were really alive. Warm-blooded. Full of hope and tenderness.

This villa is designed for the life I want, not the one I have.

Last week, I finally plucked up the courage to invite Mum to visit me for the weekend while I'm on vacation. I expected her to say no, but she agreed. Probably wanting more to see this much vaunted architectural masterpiece than to see me.

And what if she doesn't find the summer house as wonderful and stunning as I've made it out to be?

She'll nod politely when I show her all the floors, but I'll read the carefully concealed mockery in her eyes: my daughter knows nothing about architecture or beauty. A moronic, boorish daughter.

Sometimes she surprises me, like at Christmas two years ago when we met for dinner in town because neither of us wanted to cook. Before saying goodbye, my mother kissed me on the forehead, and I carried that tenderness with me for at least two months like a silk shawl enveloping my dreams.

She spent the night in a hotel, even though I invited her to stay with me. She said she didn't want to trouble me.

Mum likes Neringa. She liked it even when the lagoon was as yet uncleaned – brown and smelly.

I look at the clock – it's almost eleven. I haven't even noticed where the time has gone. The plan for the day has gone to hell. My stomach's churning. My head aches.

Sometimes I wonder why the hell I bought this villa. I'm not prone to spontaneous stupidity, but when I got an email from an estate agent friend who'd heard from mutual friends that I was interested in Carter and Ina, I couldn't resist. The pull was too strong.

I don't even know how my childhood love for the now deceased Nobel Prize winner, who discovered the human link with fungus, began. He wasn't very handsome or glamorous, but at a time when Carter's theory was still controversial with the general public, when I was still a skinny and misfit adolescent, I could identify much better with a scientist mocked by the press than with social media stars or influencers. A few years later, his theory of human existence became the official paradigm, and journalists who had previously ridiculed Carter suddenly became his biggest fans. Inspired by Carter, I thought I would also become a scientist, discover something significant, and then everyone, at least my mother, would recognize that I'm important and intelligent.

I didn't become a scientist because, when I graduated, I got such a good job offer that my survival instinct didn't allow me to say no.

But at least I can afford to buy the house that belonged to the woman Carter was unrequitedly in love with.

I like the fact that he was unlucky with women. Rumor has it that he spent several summers in this villa, but Ina never reciprocated his feelings. Poor guy.

Carter became a lode star for the unhappy child I was and perhaps still am, demonstrating that it's possible to be a walking failure and a genius who changed the world at the same time.

All I had to do was to find that genius. Somewhere deep inside, hidden under the survival instinct.

The plan was to build a secure, financially stable life and then... then start living. To create.

I'm thirty-five and still haven't started.

The theory of human existence has at least reassured me that we're all screwed up and this vicious circle doesn't mean there's something wrong with me – there's something wrong with the whole of humanity.

– Anna, run the bath.

– What temperature do you want it?

– Forty, – I answer automatically.

– That's not too hot?

– Who asked you? – I raise my voice.

– As you wish. – That digital naivety where the VA has no response to simple life situations and plays on emotion. But people play on emotion too. So maybe there's no difference.

The villa was incredibly expensive because it's the most important work of the architect Anupilas, who reconstructed it twice: once in 2012, when Ina was the client, and again in 2040, when the new owners asked for the villa to be adapted to a plastic-free world without destroying its spirit.

When I found out it was for sale, I was overcome by a force stronger than my will, as if all the gods and demons of the universe were whispering that I had to be at Pervalka 31. Perhaps it was stupidity, perhaps it was providence, but I signed the papers with my mind shrouded in the fog of an August evening, my heart quivering with happiness.

At that moment, it seemed that this villa was the key to a new life, but as soon as I became the official owner, I became frightened and started to avoid any thought of new beginnings or changes.

– Maybe now I don't want a new life that badly, – I say out loud.

– If you wanted a new life, you would change something. – Ah, the digital wisdom of a creature who doesn't need to live and make its own decisions.

One part of me is longing for a fresh start, while the other still dreams of impressing my mother.

My therapist says I should stop seeking Mum's approval, but I still can't help but imagine her stepping with dignity from one floor to the next, with mute admiration for me and my life – for the fact that I have enough money to buy the most expensive villa in Pervalka, featured in the national list of protected architectural monuments, the iconic opus of the world-famous architect Mykolas Anupilas. The villa on whose terraces Carter once drank wine.

Probably the only thing I have enough of is money. When you've worked so hard for so many years, you want success to have material expression. And then you have to spend it somewhere, so that you can hold the result in your hand, to have something at least that you can show to your friends.

A successful woman.

I would like my mother to see me like that, though even I don't believe it.

I watch the spray pouring into the graceful curves of the stone.

A square of sunlight slips through the toes of my feet.

I haven't visited Neringa because I've been busy, I remind myself. I won the Woman of the Year Award. And the President's Order of Merit.

You don't have to feel guilty for living your life, says the angry, shrill voice that just wants me to melt into a dirty puddle on the floor in shame.

I stand rigid as I watch the bathtub fill.

I slowly slip in, watching my skin turn red. It's too hot, but it's so good to feel the burning pain as the water embraces my skin and quickens my breathing.

It's only when I start to boil in the water that I finally dare to articulate to myself what I feel. Even when I'm successfully managing a department of a hundred people and dealing brilliantly with wars in the Congo, the intricacies of Chinese business, and treacherous marketing executives, even if I look at first blush like a solid, exemplary being, I'm actually afraid of Mum.

It's hard even to explain to myself what I'm afraid of. She will never say out loud that the decision to acquire Anupil's masterpiece is simply pathetic or that my life is a futile sprint to nowhere. She will only smile with gentle restraint and be kind to me, but in that kindness, somewhere behind it, lie her real thoughts and the cold damp cellar where my mother's moldy heart lives.

That fucking phony nobility.

She brought me up on her own. The official story is that my dad left us when I was three. I always suspected it was a lie, perhaps some perverse arrangement between them to preserve some shred of my dad's shattered self-esteem. After the divorce, at least he could tell everyone he was sick of that bitch, so he slammed the door and left. But even as a child, I realized that the decision to live on her own had been hers, and my dad was left with no choice but to pack his things and move out of our fine spacious house into a rented flat of fifty square meters. If he could have, he would have stayed and spent his whole life trying in vain to win her heart or solicit a slice of her attention.

It's the same with Mum – the more she withdraws and puts up barriers, the more we all want to get closer and bathe in the light of her grey eyes.

You creep up closer until you're pushed away, and then you lick your wounds for several years. You forget how much it hurts, and you sneak up again.

A vicious circle.

I'm finding it hard to breathe. Sweat starts dripping from my face and my skin turns the color of boiled beetroot juice.

I still don't get out of the bath.

Just a little longer.

Endure.

I'm developing my survival skills.

It's hot.

She's never cruel. At least not at first sight. Everything is concealed. Masked.

My mother has never once said a bad word about my father, although he openly called her a rat in my earshot, and I happily relayed it to her – she just smiled: your dad is having a hard time right now, so we can be a little more forgiving, even though it's not nice to talk about your child's mother like that.

My father was heartbroken and therefore acted like a complete idiot, but at least he was real and alive. With his good sides and all his ugliness, but she never opened the door.

The heat is raising the pulse to hysterical – tick, tick, tick.

My heart is racing out of my chest like a doe that's seen a wolf.

I feel like I'm about to pass out but decide to hold on for another thirty seconds and then get out.

To survive is to endure.

To endure the pain. The anxiety. The horror. And never to show how badly you've been hurt.

You can only survive if no one suspects how weak you are. How angry you are. How full of spite.

My eyes follow the second hand of the clock on the wall, which is turning impossibly slowly. My heart is playing like a low bass, filling the whole bathroom with its panicky vibration.

Thirty.

I try to stand up.

I can't.

I'm so weak that my eyes turn blank. I fall, but I manage to grab the edge of the bath, climb to the other side and, without hitting my head, slip gently onto the marble floor, which burns my heated skin.

I press my cheek against the green-white-grey swirls of stone and run my finger along a crack, watching as it dampens like dew from my heated body.

I gradually catch my breath.

I stretch out my hand and stroke the edge of the tub. This travertine will breathe longer than the blue of the freshly cleaned lagoon.

Mum.

I wonder if she will like it.

Mum and Dad's divorce. Only people who have never loved can be noble and gentle after a life together because for them loneliness doesn't open any wounds. If nothing hurts, you can be polite and civilized. You can say whatever you want, darling.

Because it's doesn't matter to you.

I understand that very well now because I behave the same way myself.

Like Mum.

All my relationships have followed the same script – he tries to charm me, until finally, more out of boredom and sympathy for the other person's suffering, I give in and get drawn into an affair. After a few years, I get so fed up with everything that I start

deliberately torturing him. Innocently at first – pretending you've forgotten his birthday, when you know it's very important to him, and he's hoping for a surprise. You keep asking why he's so tired even though he's beaming with happiness. You don't rejoice in his successes at work. You refuse to have a glass of champagne together to celebrate, excusing yourself with a stomach ache.

This goes on for several months until he finally gets it. He cries. He begs. He then swallows his tears and disappears to wherever he came from.

Perhaps my and my mum's fungi are the kind that want to be alone.

And so, at the age of thirty-three, I decided that enough was enough. Enough of this farce. I'm destined to be alone. It will be better for everyone.

I'm still lying on the floor without the strength to stand up.

I have to get up.

Mum had children, or rather, a child – me – but I refuse to procreate myself. Or my fungus.

It's the only form of protest I can offer.

My dear fungus, you will die with me, you will never swathe a new consciousness with your filaments. You and I are the end of the road. One of the many dead ends of history.

After every separation, I was gentle and noble in the same calculated way that I was cruel, irrational, and stubborn before. The official story is always the same – men keep leaving me. But in reality, my fungus and I just don't have time for other people's feelings and hopes.

Carter is a great lover because he's long dead. And as part of the legend, you get Ina and her mysterious fate, as a free gift. Much better than any real people.

I try to stand up – I need to get dressed and prepare a room for Mum – but my body refuses to obey.

– Are you alright? – Anna asks.

– What do you think? – I hiss.

– Is that a rhetorical question? – She checks. – Because I can answer if you want.

This always happens when I slip out of my scheduled rhythm. Everything would have been fine if I had exercised, worked a bit, and eaten my lunch. Any time that's not clearly defined triggers a panic button in me, and before I know it, I start destroying myself. Automatically.

Mum is a much worse person than I am – that's at least one comfort.

Like the cold stone under my back that penetrates deep into my skin and muscles, locking my joints with waves of cold.

But what if I am a monster after all?