

## *A Fungus' Guide to Late-Stage Capitalism*

Written by Ivy Rodgers, 2023

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No one knew the cause of the fire- the firemen couldn't even figure it out.

The basement had always been disgusting; no employees were given access to it. Of course, the building owner and CEO of the firm had a master key, but he had better things to do than venture down into the damp and surreal basement. So, it had been forgotten for quite a long time.

The mold had always been there, in the corners of things, like where the wall met the door frame and the creases on crumpled sheets of canvas. The wetness seeped in through the alcove window after a long rain, and it just never went away.

It accumulated. It spawned; it grew. It reproduced. It fortified its creations, pillars of waxy salt-like crystals within the dank and disregarded basement. Spanning from the tile floor to the dusty ceiling, the pillars looked tree-like while at the same time, looking nothing at all like trees.

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The first person to feel a bit off that day was Mohsin. He had arrived a few minutes late to the office due to road work, and hurried inside, dropping his lunch bag on the sidewalk in the process. He had fought with his brother that morning and was frustrated and tired. Mohsin sat at his desk, clicking through the fresh emails he'd work on replying to. Over the course of the first hour, his body became more and more relaxed somehow, as if he was at home, hitting his bong on the couch.

Janet came in at 9:05, late because she was at a dentist appointment. "How's things going today Mohsin? It's almost Friday," she laughed while not really laughing. Her mouth and vocal cords just happened to produce something that sounded like a laugh.

Mohsin didn't reply. It was unlike him.

She repeated herself, craning her neck to see if he had earbuds in.

His cubicle was across the room a bit, but even without looking too closely she could see that there was something wrong with him.

Mohsin's mouth twitched, spasming in unnatural ways. Janet couldn't stop looking at his lips, wriggling like two worms. Suddenly, her vision became hazy, clouded. The room started to get dark. Her head, nested in voluptuous red hair, slowly lowered to the desktop, round glasses bending uncomfortably into her face. She let out something like a laugh before the sleep came.

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Allie came into the office at 8:45, a few minutes early. She arrived in her shining white Audi, CoffeeQueen cup in hand, strutting on very long tanned legs to the front doors. She rummaged through her slim wallet for her keycard, satisfied with herself when she slid the card and listened to the metallic click of the lock. She immediately went to the bathroom, the building still and quiet although at this time the space was typically alive with noise. Allie remembered Jay and Loid were both scheduled to be off. *That's it*, she thought.

The bathroom had an odd smell to it, although it had smelled much worse in the past. Something sweet, like caramel, and something spicy, like freshly cracked black pepper. Allie coughed, choking on the quickly thickening smoke coming from a vent in the wall. Her plumping waterproof mascara ran as soon as the tears came, her bloodshot eyes flushing and flushing, but never getting rid of the toxins. The low-fat double-shot frappe cascaded as her hands seized up, a milky brown river winding across the grey tiled floor like a snake headed for the drain.

The smoke detectors took quite a while to register the smoke and activate their alarms. The dense fog of green-grey smoke hung low in the bathroom, spreading out beyond into the other rooms of the building. Once all three employees at the firm that morning were in a comatose state, the shimmering shards of lichen spores began floating, falling, and spreading. The heat from the fire down below fed its hunger, it's hunger to repopulate. It knew it wouldn't survive without making more of its kind- splitting themselves and tumbling away, exploring and marking new territories.

Even as the firefighters came bursting through the front doors of the firm's building, the bodies lay as vehicles throughout the space. A grey glow colored their flesh, each of their unique tones radiated in beautiful, iridescent ways. There was something haunting about it- their husks of skin, bone, and muscle- now become hosts to this otherworldly parasite unbeknownst to themselves. They were no longer themselves at all.

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The insurance company called the owner and CEO of the firm, Mr. Facinus, the next morning with their report. It was Friday.

"Hey there, Jack. Happy Friday! Got any plans for the weekend?" the insurance agent said with an invisible shit-eating grin.

“Yes, I’m trying to clear up this mess so I can take my wife to Cancun for her birthday. I’ve been up all night. Do you have answers for me or what?” Mr. Facinus was not someone to be fucked with. Not today, not any other day. The man was strictly business.

“Of course, of course... let me see here. Well, you had full coverage, but with the property inspection being out of date and all, you’re gonna have to decide what you want to do. We could either settle with the families, leaving you with next to nothing for the repairs, or we demolish the building and plead our case. Faulty wiring or something. Of course, you’d get a bit of money when all’s said and done. You lost something, they lost something. Destruction for everyone. It could be a win-win.”

The phone line hung silently for a few seconds before an answer came.

“Well shit, let’s tear her down.”

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THE END