

Young Man among

By Salvatore Difalco

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...

Salvatore Difalco's, "Young Man Among Roses," is as if Denis Johnson ran into John Keats in a bush and then proceeded to give him (literally) a bag of mushrooms.

I mean this in the most literary way possible: this story is cute as hell.

I remember the one of the first times I've had mushrooms: I was at Lollapalooza, way too drunk to be taking mushrooms, In Rainbows had just come out and Radiohead was headlining, I ate as many chocolates that were handed to me, and then proceeded to watch green lasers and Thom Yorke sing Reckoner amongst the colors on a hill that was not in the thronging crowd because people were too much; I remember another time I was on mushrooms and proceeded to roll around on the ground laughing because I didn't quite know the difference between taking a quarter and taking an eighth; I remember taking a fair amount of mushrooms, walking along my neighborhood during a full moon, and being reminded of why full moons are beautiful; I remember taking some straight psilocybin in gummy form, walking along a river in Louisiana, getting the cops called on me, yelling at the cops, the cops taking me to an emergency room, more yelling, and then having to tell the nurses the next day that I was fine because some people get to go crazy for an evening and that it's okay – I had to have that concept cleared by the hospital psychiatrist, but he let me go so...crazy is relative; I remember taking mushrooms and having sex in Olympia, WA after the ex and I had gone to get enough groceries for the evening; I remember taking mushrooms and laughing at Joaquin Phoenix's Joker because the colors around his head made me chuckle at the pretention of the director thinking he could steal so much from Scorsese with so few of people noticing; I remember taking mushrooms...

I think you get the point.

Difalco's story is a Romance. There is a boy, who's looked at a girl, and is obvious enough that her father knows that the man walks through his finely pruned rose bushes. He may, or may not (he did), have taken enough mushrooms to get zooming. At that point in time, you either can shit your pants in front of his dogs and fold, or you can dive in deep and tell the father you love her.

You should read and find out.

You should take mushrooms if you feel that your brain isn't weak enough to handle it.

You should tell the father you love her.

You should read Difalco's story.

It is smooth, clever, colorful, romantic, and ripples to sound when you breath in and breath out and transitions from room to room with different moods as you read.

Light and dark.

Lots of colors.

You should truly enjoy this story...

*I myself have indulged, so should you.
Enjoy.*

QUALITY QUOTABLE (*for the love of language*)...

I shake my head with vigor. My ingestion of several wild mushrooms found on the property suspends all irony at this moment. Indeed I'm mapping out the red capillaries coursing over the yellowish scleras of Mr. Hilliard's eyes and noting the clabbered green of his irises and the lack of eyelashes with growing alarm.

YOUNG MAN AMONG ROSES

I would not want Amelia to perceive my lack of shadow as a lack of character. The tiny pink roses rioting around me also lack shadows — blushes on the bark of the tree I lean against and on my black cloak against which they brush. But the clouds scudding across the blue sky obscure the afternoon sun, and thus even the tree has no shadow. Of course, window shuttered, this poetry, this theatre is lost to her. Pity. Now I hear barking. Does Amelia hear it, too?

“Amelia!”

“Who goes there?” asks a voice from the bushes.

“It's, uh, Nicholas.”

“Nicholas? I told you not to come around here anymore.”

Mr. Hilliard, patriarch and master of Dobermans — and father of my beloved Amelia — appears before me in suede jodhpurs with four of his dogs on chain leashes, teeth bared.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” he says, leaning and twisting to restrain the fractious dogs.

“Out for an afternoon stroll, I lost my way.”

“You lie with a straight face, impressive. You remind me of another bloke who used to come around here. He also lied prodigiously and also fancied the aesthetics of a debauched harlequin. You know what I told my butler, I told him, Chauncey, the lads feasted well *despite* the aesthetics. The aesthetics did not forestall the inevitable and tremendous savagery and bloodshed. Tell me something, lad, do you have parents?”

“Of course I have parents, I’m not a beast.”

“You misunderstand me.”

“Are these your roses?”

“Of course they’re my roses. Everything your eyes can see belongs to *me*, Rupert Hilliard. And even some things you cannot see. Do you understand?”

“You speak very well.”

“I don’t mean *that*, you idiot. Of course I speak well! I’ve been educated in the finest schools in Europe. Why wouldn’t I speak well?” He leans forward and lowers his chin. “Ah, yes. You were being ironical. As men of your age are wont.”

I shake my head with vigor. My ingestion of several wild mushrooms found on the property suspends all irony at this moment. Indeed I’m mapping out the red capillaries coursing over the yellowish scleras of Mr. Hilliard’s eyes and noting the clabbered green of his irises and the lack of eyelashes with growing alarm.

“Dare lock eyes with me, boy?” he says.

“I’m wondering if you have issues of the liver.”

“Are you a hepatologist? Because if you’re not a hepatologist, it’s almost lunch time.”

“Are you suggesting these hounds will *eat* me?”

“They despise trespassers.”

“You consider me a trespasser?”

Mr. Hilliard pulls out a tarnished silver pocket watch. “It’s time,” he says, tapping the watch face. “Time for you to vamoose. There’ll be no wooing of maidens today. You’ll have to roll up the pink tights and save them for another day, another castle.”

Not how I envisaged the afternoon unfolding. My legs weaken. As much as I wish to behold my beloved and even hold her in my arms, I condemn my timing and blame the ingestion of the peculiar mushrooms for my inability to persuade or to charm Mr. Hilliard.

“What’s hanging from your breast?” he asks. “A broach? What man wears a broach around the wood?”

“This is a miniature painting, by an important local artist.”

“A miniature what?”

“Painting — it’s a miniature painting, sir.”

“For a miniature mind?”

“Actually, it’s a portrait of me standing right here, among these little roses.”

“Ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous.”

“How is it ridiculous? We came here one afternoon, the painter and I, and he quickly sketched it out and applied the finishing touches in his studio. I say it’s delicate and beautiful workmanship, of the finest quality. It is a token of my adoration for Amelia.”

Mr. Hilliard scoffs.

“Tell me something, sir,” I say.

He taps the pocket watch. “In thirty seconds I tell the lads that lunch is served. *Go.*”

“Have you ever ingested the mushrooms that grow among these roses?”

Mr. Hilliard’s eyelids squeeze together. “You have eaten of these mushrooms?”

“I have. And I feel very slippery at the moment. Very slippery indeed.”

“Peasants aren’t meant to eat those mushrooms.”

“You offend me, sir, even as you grow more insubstantial by the moment.”

Indeed, while the jodhpurs stand out among the Dobermans, Mr. Hilliard himself seems to be dematerializing — what I perceive of him could be described as a grey fog, or gas.

“What the hell are you doing?” he says. “Get moving.”

An onset of vertigo militates against any sudden or rapid movements.

“Am I poisoned, sir?”

“You are, but you’ll likely not die. You’ll suffer physical pain and perplexing visions, but you will not die unless you fall into a viper pit or get devoured by forest beasts.”

“But I wish to give Amelia the painting.”

The dogs growl, but remain calm. I can imagine them tearing me to pieces vividly enough, but must admit that as I grow weaker and more delirious the idea no longer horrifies me.

“The painting? Ha! Do you really think I’d let my daughter set foot from this luxuriant and impenetrable abode to consort with a dandy who can’t cobble together two stones?”

Balls of laughter burst from what remains of Mr. Hilliard’s face. The laughter buckles my legs. I drop to my knees. Abdominal cramps convulse me. Sweat pours off my brow. An intense humming now accompanies the world; little tongues of red flare here and there. I can’t see Mr. Hilliard any more. The dogs, still chained and present, study me with calm and bloodshot eyes; they measure no threat by my presence. Perhaps they realize I am dying.

“You should . . . erect a warning sign,” I gasp.

“Yes, for trespassers to keep out.”

“No, for trespassers not to eat those . . . mushrooms.”

O sweetness, O world, O tears! Amelia, my love! Am I really dying?

A sudden white rain starts falling, dousing the dogs and lowering the curtain on this last bit of drama.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I’ve been reading a lot about psychedelics lately, the therapeutic and spiritual benefits, micro-dosing and so on. It’s all mainstream now and kind of late-breaking. Admittedly, I did my share of experimentation back in the day, and while I can’t say I achieved any spiritual leaps or enduring therapeutic benefits from my limited uses of LSD and psilocybin, they were nonpareil as aesthetic experiences. Nothing can compare with a framed Marilyn Monroe in polka-dots blinking and blowing kisses at your micro-dotted horizontal twenty-year-old self for ten hours, or buzzing hard on mushrooms in the Canadian north by a lake on a warm summer night when the sun is setting in a wash of hot pink and purple, with the surrounding forest chirring and humming and throbbing like a giant beast, nothing. I also love art — art in general but painting from many periods very much — and love using art as a jumping off point for some of my flash fictions in particular. So bringing together these three elements or ingredients — psychedelics, aesthetics, and the flash fiction form with all of its own existing and evolving codes and tropes — I let the thing do its thing without forcing it (or trying not to force it). The jumping off point in this instance was a 16th century English miniature of the same name by one Nicholas Hilliard, but as though the young dandyish subject has accidentally “poisoned” himself with mushrooms that grow among the roses of his beloved’s family estate. Why did I write this? For fun. To create something funny and beautiful, if slight. To amuse myself. To make others swing with it or laugh. To kill time during the stupid lockdown. To save myself from going mad via Netflix or re-watching Joe Rogan and Joey Diaz podcasts for the third or fourth time. It reminds me of being a child, writing these shorts. That is to say, a child at play. But also with the seriousness of a child at play, no? I do take the crafting of such objects seriously. Who said that, Nietzsche, about the seriousness of a child at play? Let’s Google it. Let’s Google it, my friends.*

AUTHOR BIO: Sal Difalco lives in Toronto at the moment. He is the author of the story collections, *Black Rabbit* (Anvil Press) and *The Mountie At Niagara Falls* (Anvil Press).