

GROWTH

The bitter taste of success.

BY WILLIAM MEIKLE

Climate change became moot on the 24 June 2026. The Sun went dim early that morning, and never recovered. One month into the *dimming*, it was all too obvious that the problem was very real. Crops were going to fail all across the Northern Hemisphere and NASA told us that it wasn't going to get better any time soon.

That's where I came in.

I'd spent the past 20 years in dingy laboratories trying to perfect a cheap foodstuff. My focus was on something that could provide for long, deep-space missions, and I had been quite successful with a genetically modified fungus I had developed that grew in the dark and was spectacularly prolific. Someone in NASA took note, put two and two together, and suddenly I had money, resources and lab techs thrown at me; it became my job to save the world.



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I don't need to remind you of that first winter. I was shielded from the worst of it by my new-found security, which meant I was warm, fed and safe; three things that became a distant memory for many that season. As matters in the wider world worsened, I took to ignoring the news broadcasts and lost myself in the tedium of lab work. Men in suits tried, in increasingly shrill tones, to hurry me up, and attempts were made first to bribe, then to bully me into cutting corners; to get *the product* into production as soon as possible.

It wasn't any coercion that finally swayed me into releasing the samples to the wider community. What did it was the pictures that I could no longer avoid; of rioting in the streets of the cities, of the forests of the Amazon and New Guinea rotting in the darkness, of vast hordes of people on the move, like migrating wildebeest. It was my job to save the day.

So I tried.

It almost worked, for a while. I released *Boletus edulis Watsonii* to select labs around the world. They in turn were quick to start production. Soon there

were factories all over the planet dedicated solely to the growth and distribution of my new mushroom. In the first summer after the dimming my creation managed to keep a proportion of the population alive.

Others were not so fortunate. Wars raged across much of Africa and the Middle East, a new plague hit South America, and it was estimated that more than a billion people

died in the year after the Sun went dark.

But my *Boletus* had given the survivors hope. It might not taste of much, but it was plentiful, and filled empty stomachs well enough. For a while the governments of the industrialized nations even started to think that they had matters under some kind of control.

Until the escapes.

No one will ever discover where or how it happened. Given our propensity for catastrophe, I suspect that there was not any single source of the outbreak. But however it happened, the *Boletus*, in spore form at first, escaped into the wider environment. It quickly discovered that it liked what it found there. The new dark, wet environment under the dimmed Sol proved to be perfect conditions for its growth, and there was no shortage of rotting vegetation for the mycelia to feed on. By the time the second winter came round, my *Boletus* was on its way to becoming the dominant form of vegetation on the planet.

Even then the powers that be were not unduly worried; well, not about the spread of the fungus. They had other concerns by then, as populations tried to shift to the

equator to take advantage of the slightly warmer weather there. More wars ensued, as they usually do. All we managed to do was put more ash, smoke and particulates into the atmosphere, ensuring that the cooling accelerated.

By halfway through the second winter, anything that wasn't covered in ice was being eaten by the *Boletus*. It was only then that the full implications of rushing its release became apparent. My creation discovered that it not only liked rotting vegetation, but that the mycelium could grow just as well on, and through, any organic material.

I saw the first pictures to come in. A mound of bodies lay in an empty town square. The camera zoomed in to show mycelia spreading in white spider's web profusion over all areas of exposed flesh. A time-lapse segment of footage showed the fruiting bodies burst wetly from arms, legs and faces to spread their parasols high.

A breeze came up, and the view was filled with a fine powder, quickly dispersed as the spores went looking for fresh feeding grounds.

I've been in prison since then, awaiting trial, charged with crimes against humanity. Any news I've had has been at third-hand from my jailers, but they speak of a planet going to rot, of a rampant mycelium infection that resists all antibiotics, is immune to all known treatments.

They say I will die for what I have done. But I know that already, for today I found a small, but perfectly formed, fruiting body between my toes. It's only a matter of time.

They have allowed me one last look out of the window. My prison is high above what used to be Manhattan. It is now a beautiful field of *Boletus* parasols swaying in the wind, stretching as far as the eye can see.

I can die happy.

I may not have saved mankind.

But it looks like I have saved the planet. ■

William Meikle is a Scottish writer resident in Canada with 10 novels published in the genre press and more than 200 short-story credits in 13 countries.