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### Of Moose and Men (and Moose-Men)

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Henry Cavanaugh

Professor Reents

13 Ways of Writing Nature

11 December 2019

Of Moose and Men (and Moose-Men)

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“Hey John,” my Uncle Brian said, looking up from his magazine, “did you know that moose roll in their own piss to attract mates?”

My dad laughed, and sarcastically widened his eyes, “... doesn’t everyone?”

Their bodies shook with laughter, their stocky shoulders rising and falling as the two brothers filled the air with deep chuckling. They kept this up for a while, sitting side by side in white wicker chairs on the porch, laughing as they gazed far off at the orange sun slowly lowering itself into a dark blue lake.

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All of the family knew what the lowering of the sun meant. It meant that soon we would pile into cars and drive around the winding roads surrounding Pittsborough, New Hampshire, staring intently at the shadows in the woods. To do so was a long-standing family tradition, originating way back when my Uncle Brian and my father were just young boys. Since those ancient times, my family had rented the same three houses and set out upon the same roads with the same intent: to find a moose.

Moose are an integral part of Pittsborough's identity. In fact, the town sits right in the middle of a region known as “Moose Alley” directly under the Canadian border. Each year a “moose festival” is held here, which includes moose-calling contests, a marketplace of various

moose and non-moose related trinkets, and a strangely out-of-place car showcase that often looks suspiciously more like a parking lot than anything else. The moose is the town's mascot, though not in the dude-dressed-up-as-an-animal way, but in the way that real giant moose are known to frequent the area and even wander into town. Pittsburgh's connection to moose brings a great sense of pride to the locals.

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“Henry!” my cousin Jaquan yelled as he ran towards me. Pulling on my sleeve he demanded, “Come in my car!”

I obliged, following him outside.

“We’re definitely gonna see a moose today,” he informed me confidently.

“I hope so,” I said, smiling at his enthusiasm.

Jaquan and his sister Mystique had been adopted into the family by my dad’s eldest sibling, Aunt Cathy, only months earlier. At 7-years-old, this was his first time in the Moose Alley. Because of this, he had yet to be disappointed like the rest of my 37 cousins by the countless quiet nights driving around in the dark. I wasn’t about to break this to him either; he was way too excited for that.

“I wonder what they look like,” he pondered aloud, his eyes wide, “Grampa said they’re as big as a car!”

In my experience, moose often don’t really look like anything, because usually, they don’t show up. I decided to keep that pessimistic thought to myself.

“What are you smiling at?” he demanded to know.

“Nothin,” I replied.

He and I had become pretty close in the last few months, and I had watched from a distance as he learned how the family functioned. Hearing him casually refer to our grandfather as “Grampa” had brought a smile to my face, as it had demonstrated just how far he’d come. Given that he never really had a family of his own during his lifetime, he was doing a pretty stand-up job adjusting. First, he had learned the multitude of names in my giant Irish family. Second, he had learned the unique mannerisms of the family, such as my sister’s world-piercing laugh, my cousin Erin’s shyness, and my dad and my uncle Brian’s neverending sarcasm. I knew that he had learned these because he often tried to imitate them, especially the sarcasm. However, he had a long way to go before he could reach my dad and my uncle Brian’s level of wit. For they had spent decades becoming masters of sarcasm. Finally, Jaquan had earned the love of many of my 37 cousins through his energetic enthusiasm for life. Whenever he showed up to the family gatherings, everyone’s smiles rose a little higher, and he would instantly be brought in to whatever we were doing. Despite his unique name and dark skin potentially distinguishing himself as different to an outsider looking in, he was rapidly becoming just as much of a natural member of the family as anyone else. However, he was still one of the only cousins to have never seen a moose, and he seemed to think this was of critical importance if he were to become a Cavanaugh.

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Stepping into the car, the smell of wet dog immediately smacked me in the face along with wet fur and slimy drool as Rauri, my Aunt Cathy’s humongous Irish Wolfhound, leaned over to make sure I was someone he knew. He was an absolutely massive creature. If he had antlers, he could have probably passed for a baby moose (albeit a very strange-looking grey one).

I wrinkled my nose and rubbed his chin. “You stink,” I told him.

He exhaled heavily at me, and then slowly lowered his massive frame back down to the car floor. I looked away and noticed my Uncle Brian and my dad descending down from the porch, coming towards the car.

“Who stinks?” my dad joked as he opened the passenger door. “Is it you?” he said, pointing his finger at Jaquan.

“Noooo!” giggled Jaquan, vigorously shaking his head.

“Ok, well I’ll be keeping my eye on you anyway,” my dad said, squinting his eyes and keeping his gaze on Jaquan, who stared directly back at him, trying his hardest to look serious as the corners of his mouth slowly turned up into a smile.

And then we were off, down the roads which snake and dart around the wilderness as if trying to respect its domain. We passed countless moose-crossing signs, waterfalls, and strange shadows as the night went on. Former moose-calling-contest champions bellowed a variety of ridiculous noises into the woods, varying in resemblance from a hoarse frog’s croak, to the groan of someone trapped under a heavy object. Unsurprisingly, these calls did not summon any self-respecting moose to our cars. Over time, Jaquan’s smile gradually lowered into a frown, as he realized that finding a moose wasn’t going to be as easy as he had once thought.

We reached the halfway point, marked by a nameless ice cream stand which (of course) serves the best moose-tracks ice cream in the world. Resting our eyes, we traded stories of particularly unusual shadows we had seen in the woods. But Jaquan sat quietly alone, staring off into the distance. I walked over and rubbed the top of his head.

“Cheer up bud, we’ve got days to find one.”

“I know but I want to see one *now*,” he replied defiantly, looking away from me.

“Well you don’t get to see one now, you’ll see one when you see one”

He gave no response. *Fair enough*, I thought. The statue of the moose which advertises the ice cream stand stared at me, as though daring me to point at it and tell my cousin “Look! A moose.” He would probably hit me if I did that. Also, I didn’t have to make the joke, because everyone else would do it for me when we left, as was tradition. No one would laugh of course, as was also tradition.

When we set out once more, Jaquan was staring even more intently out of the window, willing the beasts to reveal themselves from the woods. There was nothing, until immediately after turning over the hump of a hill we saw cars parked on the side of the road, beaming lights into the woods.

“There’s probably a moose there,” Cathy told her son. “See all those people?”

Jaquan sat up in his seat, his smile returning.

“Where?!” he asked, his voice breaking with hope.

“Right up here, we’re about to stop.”

We got out of the car a little bit up the road and walked towards the sound of people talking. The wind bit at our faces as we struggled through the thin air. And then the shadow of small antlers broke over the brush. *It must be a baby!* I thought.

A second later, I realized what this meant, and I quickly warned the others, “It must be a baby.”

“Jaquan stop,” my aunt said, and then again louder when he kept going. Finally, he did, his mouth opening as he gazed in wonder at the shadowy antlers.

All of us, except for Jaquan, were looking for the moose's mother. It would not be a good idea to get between an 800-pound moose and her baby.

“Look!” Jaquan excitedly whispered as the antlers rose further up from the bush.

The moose's antlers were perfectly symmetrical, and outlined by the spotlights across from us. The tall thin grass shifted and rustled around the creature as it moved. The grass suddenly parted as the antlers rose up further, the moose's head facing away from us, now fully above the grass. The oversized antlers bobbed awkwardly in the light.

Then in what should have been a magical moment, the baby moose started to turn towards us. But as it gradually rotated, more and more things seemed to be out-of-place. First was the distinct lack of snout, then the white skin, the glasses, and finally the human laughter coming directly from the beast itself. This moose had a human face. In fact, this was no moose at all, but was instead a dude, dressed in a moose costume, crouching in the darkness of the bushes in a random ditch on the side of a random road in New Hampshire. Jaquan's face scrunched up, his mouth settling into a deep frown as he realized that this was a weirdo, and not the majestic moose he was promised. Water gathered along the bottom of his eyes as he held back tears. Unable to look any longer, he turned back towards the car, his arms and head hanging low, as Cathy tried her best to comfort him.

The moose-man spoke: “Hi there! Is this not what y'all were expecting?”

He burst into laughter for a third time. No one else seemed to know what to do, and most were just smiling uncomfortably and looking around in confusion, gauging the reaction of others. My Uncle Brian and my dad stood to the side, chuckling as they quietly talked.

“Hey... quick question... do you roll around in your own piss?” my uncle inquired.

“What?” the weirdo asked.

“You know... to attract mates?” Brian clarified.

“Oh, uh-- yeah of course!” he declared, resuming his character proudly.

“How’s that going for you?” my dad questioned.

“Great!”

Thankfully, this round of jokes had broken the tension, and everyone was laughing now, jokingly questioning the stranger. We all seemed to be happy, except for one person. Jaquan was leaning against the back of his mom’s car, gazing into the woods, his arms crossed. *He’ll come around.* I optimistically reflected. Even though this was the first and only moose-man we had encountered, and he and his sister were the only adopted cousins in my family, I knew that many years ago every one of my biological cousins had angrily glared at the woods in the way Jaquan was now. Still, I knew how badly he wanted to have this shared experience with his new family. In that way, his experience was different, but different in the same way that one might compare finding a moose-man to finding a moose: different, but not inherently worse. Don’t get me wrong, seeing a real moose is an incredible experience, but I knew that my family would never forget this particular encounter.

My dad came up next to me, resting his hand on my shoulder.

“He’ll come around.”

“I hope so.”

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