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Thoughts on a Moose

Only a few miles further west on highway 41, after the sullen glow of the city of Marquette died out into the wooded darkness, a red-skied dawn began to timidly dust the tops of the scraggly pines along the road leading to the Keweenaw. I found myself driving faster, perhaps trying to outrun the morning which was not brightening the landscape so much as casting an ever-deepening red shroud, setting the world on fire. I glanced at my phone to see the text messages and voicemails from my girlfriend, parents and whoever else that accumulated overnight. More importantly, I saw that it wasn't yet seven o'clock. As long as I didn't stop, I could actually make the ten o'clock ferry to Isle Royale from Copper Harbor. It didn't seem possible when I left Ann Arbor some nine or ten hours ago. My windows were down and my radio off, and that is the way it was the whole time save for a brief rainstorm before the bridge. As I let my hand dangle outside the car, feeling the warm, moist summer air ripping through my fingers hour after hour, my thoughts turned from rage to sadness to euphoria and back again; they finally settled on exhaustion. I still felt exhausted just then as the sun came up, and I'd been feeling that way for a long time. I'd have pulled over right then and there to some backwards, run-down motel and slept for a week if I hadn't decided that I wanted to see a moose a couple of days back, that I needed to see a moose.

I drove onward, down the winding roads of Houghton, over the channel, and back upwards again through Hancock. I passed through what seemed like dozens of tiny forgotten mining towns and imagined the people waking up, kicking around in the red iron-ore dust of the driveways and back-roads before wandering down to the deserted mine shafts and shipping docks to stare, to wonder who they are, and why they're here. An absent look from an old man

crossing the street and perplexedly glancing at my car gave my daydream credence. He looked like he wanted to ask me a question, but I was already gone. The sky continued to brighten overtop of the road winding and rising and falling through tunnels of forest and I felt as though I was awakening.

At the top of a final rise, the trees opened up and I saw the tiny town of Copper Harbor sitting bravely on the shore of Lake Superior, at the end of the road. I rolled up the windows, feeling the chill of the lake moving inland, and drove through the streets of little houses, shivering even in July, to the harbor where the ferry still appeared to be docked. Only a few crew members or employees were fussing about with dock-lines and papers, and I laughed. Maybe it was just that emotions seem to become polarized alongside sleep deprivation, but the fact that I was there, that I had made it, that I was about to remove myself from my world and embark upon something for which I was so ill prepared felt like a crowning achievement at that moment, and maybe it was. I was still beaming as I pulled into nearby grassy lot to park amongst the other ferry goers, and even as my stiffened-left knee collapsed under me as I stepped out of the car, something felt right within my soul. Righter than it had, anyway.

“Are you alright, there?” I was lying supine in the grass beside my car, but quickly sat up upon hearing someone voice his concerns, rightfully perhaps, and saw a man kneeling beside his backpack looking in my direction. He was outfitted in what appeared to be top-of the line hiking gear including a quite impressive looking backpack complete with those goddamn ski-poles, but his long, graying hair flying out of a goofy fishing hat was his undoing, a welcomed undoing in my opinion.

“Yeah, yeah, just a little stiff from the drive,” I said, standing up. He barely gave me a nod before continuing to squirrel away some more of his supplies, which gave me a much

needed reminder to start gathering some articles myself. I opened the trunk, shoving aside the textbooks and papers I'd been filing in my car, and pulled out my father's hiking pack, an old, metal-framed model that still had a couple tags from parks out west. Yellowstone was the only one that I recognized. The backpack had that lovely musty smell of the basement of youth. Mothballs smell like memories, I've always thought.

I shoved an extra pair of shoes in the bottom of the backpack and then began to pack my clothes – also scattered amongst the clutter of my trunk – which included a raincoat, a couple pairs of pants, shirts, anything I had that didn't disagreeably overpower the pack's memory smell. One of my favorite thermals didn't make the cut. I then grabbed the grocery bag full of the food I'd bought before leaving town yesterday. Transferring one item after another from the bag to my pack, I found there to be a higher proportion of cans of beans and hot dog-like products than I cared to recognize. Maybe that's why I bought a package of marshmallows, unnecessary as they are. And maybe that's why the woman at the cash register cocked her head to the side, smiling, and asked me if I was going on a little camping trip. I told her to grab a fifth of whiskey off the shelf behind her, and her smile receded. I packed that in on the very top, just before running out of space.

I opened one of the side doors to grab my sleeping bag from the back seat, along with the tent, which was another vintage item from my father, one perhaps on extended loan from the army from the look of the lettered, green burlap sack in which it was packed. I dropped them on the ground beside my backpack, and quickly realized that I didn't have any rope to lash the tent and sleeping bag onto the frame. I also realized that my dad was never in the army.

“Need some ties?” I turned around to see fish-hat guy all ready to go, just about to lock up his car. He had the same expression on his face as when he delivered the first comment,

which was barely an expression at all. He had a weathered, men-of-all-men kind of aura, but came across as sympathetic, defeated, and slightly estranged from, perhaps, himself.

“Yeah I suppose I could use some if you’ve got any extras.” Without a nod of recognition or even a grimace for that matter, he grabbed a couple long zip-ties out of his car before slamming his trunk. Seeing him poignantly walking over and handing them off, I felt as if he’d lived his life for this. How could I have not believed he’d forayed to the ends of earth. Not just to the woods, mountains, deserts, but to the great cities with great people. I believed he had that greatness with him. He carried it around. Though, maybe it was too heavy now, after so much. Perhaps he just needed to take off the fucking fishing hat. “Thanks,” I said.

“Going out to the island, are you?” he questioned, kind of looking at me, kind of at the sky.

“Yeah, I’ve never been. I’ve lived in Michigan far too long to have never gone. Just kinda picked up and decided to do it for whatever reason.”

“Oh, reason not the need I suppose. I’ve been all over the place, but it still might be my favorite. As far as American national parks go, it has the least amount of visitors but the highest percentage of people who come back. Not unrelated factors, I presume.” I nodded and closed up my car, quite satisfied with myself for hitting on his well-traveled nature. He continued, “Have you enough food and supplies? Because once you’re out there, you’re out there.”

“I think I should be okay,”

“Well, nice to see some spontaneity left in you kids,” he paused and rolled up his sleeve to look at his giant watch. “Ready or not, though, we’ve got to go get on that ferry. I’m David by the way.”

“Paul. Nice to meet you.” We shook hands and I heaved my backpack over my shoulders and we started off towards the harbor. The mist continued to roll in off the lake. It was thicker as we got back to the shoreline; I couldn’t even see out beyond the end of the harbor. We reached the dock and David took off his pack and headed towards the small harbor building.

“I’m going to go buy a map and run to the bathroom. See you on the boat,” he said as he trotted off towards the bathrooms with his backpack still on, each step catching up to him and weighing him down a half-step from normal; it made me smile. I walked over to the ferry and gave a blonde girl with a clipboard my name, and stepped inside the main cabin. It couldn’t have been half full, maybe on account of the weather. I walked towards the back to sit down on a bench by the window. It was warm inside. The guys sitting in front of me were drinking coffee and talking in low voices, just audible above the belabored groan of the diesel engine vibrating the floor and the walls. I rested my head against the window and realized, again, how exhausted I was. I took my phone out of my pocket to see that it was just about ten o’clock. I held it for a moment and thought about calling everyone back, but it seemed like too big an ordeal, and rather compromising to my trip, perhaps. I was going to Isle Royale, and I was going to see a moose. The boat didn’t even leave the dock, and I was asleep.

The boat must have hit a rather large wave as I felt my head slam against the window, awakening me suddenly. Looking out the window, I saw it was still foggy, but the water had gotten considerably rougher, but nowhere near Superior’s full potential of wrath, or so I’d heard.

“Almost there. You’ve been out for a good two and a half hours.” I looked to my left to see David sitting at the end of my same bench, examining the island map he’d bought. I nodded and wiped some of the drool off my face. “So what compelled you, without any sleep or

planning to pack up and come out here?" It was probably a good question, one that I hadn't felt like answering even when I was asking myself.

"I don't know," I said. "I want to see a moose." He looked up from his map, one eye closed a bit more than the other, then back down again.

"I see. Well you won't have any problems with that. There's about six hundred packed onto that island, probably more because the winter was mild this year."

"They die off in harsh ones?" I asked.

"Yeah, but not why you'd think. There's wolves out there as well, two separate packs, and in harsh winters with lots of snow, the moose can't move as well and the wolves take them out more easily. Opposite's true when there's not as much snow."

"There's wolves too, eh?"

"Yeah, but you've got to get over to the western side of the island to see them, or at least hear them. That's where I'm headed." He turned the map towards me, and showed me how he was planning to hike upwards of fifty miles. "I'll probably be up here a week or so, but if you should feel compelled to make it over there yourself, I way over packed in terms of food and would be more than happy to share. We could go together, or alone, alone's nice sometimes. Anyway, I offer because I'm going to take a shot in the dark and say you didn't bring a week's worth of food."

"Good guess. Yeah, I've got the time anyway. I'd probably be up for that."

"Well how about this, you take a couple days for your moose hunt and meet me here on the morning on the third day, Thursday morning." He pointed to a campsite on the southern side of the island, still fairly close to Rock Harbor where the ferry comes in.

“Alright. That’s a plan,” I said. He nodded and started folding up the map, but stopped, suddenly transfixed with the window.

“We’re here,” he said. I felt the boat slow as the fog-enshrouded mass of green rose and fell from the angering waves of Lake Superior. One by one, tiny rock islands floated into my gaze; some had a few mangled trees, some only one, some just low-growing shrubs and mosses. All of them, though, at least the very smallest, seemed to be worlds in and of themselves, ecosystems constructed over thousands of years, for no one and no thing. The inner-child in me did not invoke desires to visit these little islands as the case usually is, to stake claims to something so small and manageable as the case usually is. It wasn’t my age and wisdom restraining this desire, cautioning against what is there and what could hurt, but that I felt just the opposite for these little islands as well as the main one at which the ferry was then about to dock; what was there wasn’t so very frightening, but rather, what was not.

We stepped off the boat, the wind still calm and the mist still oppressive, and listened to a speech from a park ranger while we waited for our bags to be unloaded off the top of the ferry. He was a small, unassuming man perpetually looking groundward as he spoke, but since it was a national park, he did have a gun, so everyone at least sort of listened. By the time he was done, all the packs were piled into one area. I put on my knit hat and grabbed my pack once most of the others had been claimed, not that mine was indistinguishable in its antiquity. “Character!” my dad would always shout in the face of something being too old, “it’s got character!” I heaved it onto my back. It also had an uncomfortable metal frame, but shit, it did have character. I saw David readying himself, checking the map one more time, so I walked over to say goodbye before heading out.

“So I’ll see ya in a couple days, then?” I asked.

“Sure, but I’ll be camping over there on that night anyway, so if you want to go back sooner it’s no big deal.” I nodded and shook his hand before turning back to where the ranger had said the trailhead began. “Just make sure you see what you came here to,” he added before I was out of earshot.

“The moose?” He smiled,

“Yeah, if that’s it.”

By early afternoon, about the time I hit the first trail leading to the interior of the island, the fog began to lift into a blue sky. I sat down on an exposed slab of bedrock to take off my hat and sweater. I took a long drink out of my water bottle and felt the warmth of the sun on my skin, and heat rising up from the barren rock beneath me. A hare slowly emerged from the forest into the rock clearing to my right. It was shockingly large, cat-sized even. It didn’t even seem to hop so much as crawl, old-dog-like, over the branches and between ferns until it became aware of my presence, whereupon it shuffled back into the forest unconvincingly frightened. The desolate grey water of Lake Superior followed suit along with the sky to become the deepest and purest of blues. Sunlight glinted off its ripples and between the thicket of firs between me and the lake.

I walked upward for the next couple of hours towards Mount Franklin, a rise along the central ridge of the island with an elevation well over a thousand feet. It was not a steady climb in any direction, the path never made up its mind where it wanted to go. Though, with every rise I felt lighter and with every twist and turn a little more like myself. I walked on boardwalks over swamps, stepped on stones to cross little rivers along fjord-like inlets from the lake beside mountains of limestone jutting upward like castles below clearings and thickets, all of it

beautiful, all of it real, all of it all around me. The sun was getting low by the time I found myself sitting on a log at the peak of Mount Franklin. I could see over the northern half of the island and Lake Superior all the way to Canada miles and miles away. Sweat-soaked and blotched in my own blood from battling the black flies, I leaned back against the trunk of a tree and kicked up my feet to correctly enjoy the scene I, alone, was looking upon. It was an awe-striking view, yes, but it had its beginnings when I entered the forest and heard the voices of other hikers be replaced by the whispers of the wind through the pines and the songs of the birds. Maybe it began when I got to Copper Harbor, or when I left town yesterday, for that matter. Ultimately, this view, this island, this foreign-feeling calm must have had its beginnings when I consciously began to feel like a shadow of myself for one reason or another.

Hungry, I reached down into my bag to pull out a pack of hot dogs and laughingly ate a couple of them raw. I couldn't help myself from completing the scene by taking out the whiskey to wash down a dinner enjoyable only at that spot, at that moment. I would have liked to have seen David's reaction to me just then, hiking with whiskey and hot dogs. I grabbed my pack and put it up against the tree to make myself a pillow, and the smell of memories once again filled the air as I leaned against it.

I soon packed up, needing to get back to a campsite before dark. I decided David would have to go questing for wolves on his own later this week. Besides, I thought, gazing over the ridge with my nostrils still filled with the sweet smell of mothballs, I'd already seen my moose.

