

ME AND THE MOOSE

© Perry Glasser

Originally in *Twilight Zone Magazine* as “The Metamoosophis”



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My friend Marvin was excited. He’d spent the day wandering through the Central Park Zoo and he’d finally figured things out. He needed to tell someone. Would I meet him right away?

I had a dinner date—these things happen sporadically—and I thought of the steak I would have ordered. The trade-off was between Peter Luger’s and a not terribly attractive man whose blue suit jacket strained at the button. When he met me at the media networking party, he perspired, and sure the room was hot and, yeah, gin from wax paper cups will do that, but the business card he gave me was the real article. It was just a little networking for me, but I had a hunch he wanted more. I thought wistfully of the magazine he worked for, I also thought of how I’d spend an evening trying to say “No,” without offense, and I recalled the times I’d said “Yes,” and regretted it, and so I thought how some things were not worth even a steak, creamed spinach and home fries, not even at Peter Luger’s.

I told Marvin just to come on by. I had nothing going on.

Marvin showed up with wine and cheese. I supplied the crackers. It was July, which meant that my apartment windows were open and the curtains hung sorry and limp. I have a magnificent view of the brick wall of the building across the alleyway, including Mrs. Goldblatt’s kitchen window. She was a widow who drinks a lot of green tea. Leaning our elbows on the windowsills, we’ve discussed the merits of antioxidants. I’ve persuaded her to go organic. She tells me men are easy. She no idea I could not care

less. About men, I mean. At least, not in the way she means.

I like men; I like women. They are different. End of story.

Marvin had a degree from an Ivy League college, but worked nights as the guard at a 24-hour-a-day drugstore. I did not enough freelance photography and a lot more cocktail waitressing. So we both had our days free.

We sat on the thin carpet on my living room floor and poured the wine into water tumblers with ice. Barbaric, but it was cheap wine.

“You have to promise not to laugh, Belinda.”

“I won’t laugh. What kind of cheese is this?”

“Is it too sharp?”

“Every time I bite it, it bites back.”

“The man said it was from Denmark.” I peeled the price tag from the bottle. \$4.98. “You won’t laugh?”

“Look,” I said. “I’ll put my forearm in my mouth. No one can laugh with her forearm in her mouth.”

He took a breath. “I’m a moose.”

I had to bite my arm.

“I am a moose trapped in man’s body!”

Cracker crumbs started spurting from my mouth around my elbow. What can you do?

“Here! Look at this!” Marvin took a crumpled newspaper from his back pocket and threw it in my lap.

A gay newspaper. There were very few photographs, so I doubted it could be a market. I flipped through it. Lousy paper and staple bound. The content was based on the very ‘80s idea that pipes and wires better respond to the ministrations of a mechanic whose sexual preferences match the reader’s; it was filled with articles about how to find a gay plumber or lesbian electrician. Excuse me? I’ll take someone who can install a faucet that does not leak, and I do not care if he sleeps with his pet goat. You live in New York City, you learn to live in New York City, which means you tolerate difference, endure a sense of imminent doom, cultivate survivalist paranoia, and value good neighbors like Golblatt and friends like Marvin, even if they are dropping their beads.

“Are you gay? Marvin, are you trying to come out to me? I’m so flattered.” I started to tell him what to expect, but he interrupted me.

“No! I’m a *moose*. Look at page nineteen. Look!” He jabbed at the paper in my hand. “The ad! Look at the ad!”

A small box beside the column announced the practice of a surgeon, one Wolfgang Perlmutter. In Pennsylvania. *Counseling. Hormones. Discretion.*

“All my life I’ve felt different, strange, out of place. And this is why! Can you imagine what it is like? I realized it today. At the zoo.” His hand covered his heart. “I am a moose trapped in a man’s body.” I was waiting for the punch line, but he was sincere. “Going into a public lavatory has always been a trial. When I was a kid I didn’t know why I couldn’t enjoy the games other kids played. But now I know. I need space. Mountains. Open air.”

“Snow.”

“Right. Snow. Snow is good.”

“Pine trees.”

He missed my sarcasm. Most people do. “Yes! I am a moose. I am proud of being a moose! And I will no longer hide from my nature!”

My father had a vulgar taste for overdeveloped teenage girls. He ran off with one when he was thirty and my mother was twenty-seven. She had four daughters at the time, the eldest of whom was eight. That was me. I spent my alleged childhood packing school lunches for my sisters while Mom brought home a string of bony-assed men who broke her heart and eventually always left her dysfunctional on our living room sofa. The one bit of advice she gave us that was worth anything was that men were not loathsome, but were subject to fits. The best thing a girl could do was keep her legs together as long as she could stand it, keep her bags packed, and when the fit was on a man, get to an exit.

Mother’s advice has always proven sound, but while I was never known to take good advice, I’ve solved the problem in a way that would never have occurred to her.

* * *

Marvin was a sad man. After finishing school he spent a decade searching for himself in the damndest places. He trekked Nepal. There was a month he ingested nothing but brown rice, lentils and distilled water. For a while, he was regularly paying 50 bucks for thirty minutes of being locked naked and floating in a salt-water filled coffin. He screamed himself hoarse, but then floated to “cosmic awareness.” I’m thrilled

if I can guess within an hour what time of day it is, but Marvin looked within to find his place in the cosmic mandala.

When Marvin had first moved next door, my heart went to him. It was good to have a male-friend neighbor. It gives a New York girl a certain sense of security to know that within screaming distance was a man who just might be able to scare away your random home invader. While that scenario is admittedly unlikely, men are also handy for reaching cans on the top shelf, and when it comes to changing light bulbs in ceiling fixtures, there is nothing better. We split the cost of his Internet service, and we shared a wifi hookup.

Marvin's American face was plain as Wonder Bread, the kind of face on which surprise and disappointment registered instantly, but on which stronger emotions such as anger, passion, or grief made hardly any mark at all. He had the eyes of a puppy Golden Retriever, and nice arms for a man who was clearly non-athletic. His belly slightly sagged over his belt, but that is neither unattractive nor unusual for a man in his early thirties. I no longer have any patience for the buff and cut crowd of either sex. I'd meet him in the building's narrow hallway disposing of trash or something, and he'd be wearing just a t-shirt, flip-flops, and not terribly modest boxer trunks. He always said hello, was never pushy, and after a few months of regularly watching taped episodes of *Lost*, we became trusted friends.

Shortly after Marvin declared himself to be a moose, he vanished for a week. I hardly noticed his absence because I decided to paint my apartment. Five shades of pink. It was like living inside a rose. Sometimes you do anything to feel better. I have my career ambitions, but I would not mind finding someone for whom I can make breakfast. I like French toast with a little vanilla in the batter. I pour orange juice. I will be silent while she reads *The New York Times*, or noisy. Whatever.

I figured, change your surroundings, and the rest will follow.

Painting the inside of a closet in July in New York is a special kind of experience. Fumes collect; the mind whirls. In small doses, delirium can be pleasant, even if it means your dying brain cells discharge a final electrical impulse. You hear telephones and locomotives that aren't there, but you persist knowing that with a few more swipes with the roller, the closet will be done. Meanwhile, you swear you hear the Mormon Tabernacle Choir singing Pink Floyd.

I'd just finished the closet when Marvin pressed my door buzzer, so I had no way of being certain if the sound was real. Marvin let himself in. I was lying on the sofa, drinking water from an Evian bottle I'd refilled a dozen times from the tap, reading fan magazines, trying to get a line on how to become one of the *paparazzi*. I couldn't get up.

"Notice anything different?" he asked.

"You first," I said.

He looked around; then his face brightened. "You did your hair?"

Five shades of pink. Marvin's only real topic of conversation was Marvin. So I said, "You got it."

"Looks wonderful."

My hair looked like an eagle's nest in molting season. I was thinking of cutting it short and dying it pink. "Thanks, Marvin."

"How about me? Notice anything different?"

I studied him. He looked the same as ever, an aging JayCee president from a small town in a big square state, a man who needed more sun.

"You'll have to tell me, Marvin. I'm not feeling all that well today. You may have noticed I haven't gotten off the couch."

"Doctor Perlmutter said it would take a while. I guess it doesn't show yet."

"It doesn't. What are we talking about?"

"I've started my therapy. Injections. Doctor Perlmutter is a very, very great man. Profound. He says that next week I should bring a friend. Someone to drive me back to New York because I may be weak. From the sedatives. It's only three hours, Bel."

"Sure, Marvin."

"Each way."

"Okay."

"And you'll have to wait while I undergo treatment. That's like a half day."

"No problem."

He leaned to kiss my forehead, then sat beside me on the sofa's edge. He bent his head and parted his hair. "Are you sure you don't see anything?"

I was sprinkled by his dandruff. "Nothing at all, Marvin."

He sighed. "It's so hard. And such a long, long road. Do you have any lettuce? I'm starved."

* * *

Wolfgang Perlmutter knew his business. All the way back to the city, Marvin slept, curled against the passenger door like a child against his mother's hip. I'd spent

the day behind the wheel of the little car Marvin had rented and in Doctor Perlmutter's waiting room, not a bad place to brood on how my career and my life were immobile. No photos, but I read all those doctor's office pamphlets: *The Care And Feeding of Your Spleen. You And Your Liver.* Not a lot of photo opportunities there, I admit.

As I drove back to Manhattan, the sun was setting at our backs. We were crossing the George Washington Bridge and the city looked like gold. I was due at work in 45 minutes, but I drove Marvin back to our place, let him lean on me in the elevator, and helped him collapse gently into bed. We'd return the rental tomorrow. He sprawled across the sheets. I made it to work with five minutes to spare, just enough time to squeeze into the costume the enlightened management of Bonkers forced on us, this scanty thing designed by Torquemada, all herringbones and satin that pushed my boobs up to my chin and did not allow me to draw a deep breath. Despite the outfit, I still managed to look like a girl a man might want to bring home to Mom and introduce as "just a friend." I think they hired me because I had only one visible tattoo, the green rose on my left shoulder.

Janet, who worked the same shift I did, never looked like the girl you'd bring home to Mother. She'd arrived in New York from Wisconsin only six months before. In the outfits we wore, Janet's legs started at her neck. She had skin like buttermilk. You looked, you thought *Wow*, but after talking with her for a few minutes, you realized she was a woman totally without guile, bland as a farm girl, which is what she was. She thought our costumes were cute. I flirted with her, but if she knew girls could like girls, she never let on; here yes stayed clouded with miscomprehension. She looked like a super model, but had the heart of a Girl Scout.

I had been after her for weeks to come to my place for a photo session, figuring that with a model like her I just might get my foot through an editor's front door. I also liked looking at her with her clothes off, and I wondered if in my apartment, instead of our changing room, I might work up the courage to explain what I had in mind.

Janet had put me off several times, and I had quit asking, so I was delighted when one night she said that if I were still willing she had some time the next afternoon. She ordinarily worked days as a salesgirl, but there had been a schedule change. I promised nothing but art shots. If I could do a glossy portrait or two that she needed for an audition, she'd call it even. Honest, Janet wanted to dance on Broadway. Back in Wisconsin, she had taken tap.

Janet showed up right after what the rest of the world thinks of as lunch and for a cocktail waitress is an early breakfast. I'd set up a beige backdrop and had some ideas about using natural light mostly because I couldn't afford any other kind. Nude, she was

relaxed and uninhibited, willing to move herself into odd postures for the lens, chatting about her mother's rhubarb pie when Marvin rang the doorbell.

I opened the door a crack, but Marvin barged right in. He was wearing his usual t-shirt and boxer trunks. In jeans and cutoffs, I suddenly felt over-dressed.

"Look!" he shouted, bent forward, and pointed to the top of his head.

"That's so cute!" Janet squealed.

Like mushrooms popping through the thin growth of his hair, Marvin had antlers, very tiny, but definitely antlers growing from the top of his skull.

Janet pulled a sheet around her and came over to take a closer look. "Really adorable," she said. "Can I touch them?"

"I am a moose." He stood more dignified than Charles de Gaulle accepting a medal. "Who might you be?"

"This might be Janet," I said. "We're kind of busy here, Marvin." I waved my Leika under his nose.

Janet's right boob fell wondrously free as she extended her hand to Marvin. Her boob looked marvelous. As she unhurriedly covered up, I realized that her boob was never to be mine.

Marvin said, "Actually, I have always been a moose, but only recently learned the essential truth of my life."

They were limply holding hands. Janet was wide-eyed; her moist lips parted. I'd paid for the lip plumper and the Maybelline Crushed Candy lip gloss, a perfect match for one of the pinks I'd painted the walls, but I was already just a witness at the Great Meeting.

Gazing into Janet's blue eyes, Marvin explained, "I still have some surgery to go through. A tail, for instance. I'll want a tail. I'm unsure about the hooves, though. My doctor says I should wait on that. I'll have to decide during the counseling sessions."

"Fascinating. Who is your doctor?"

"Perlmutter," I said.

"The genius, Wolfgang Perlmutter," Marvin corrected.

"You can let go of each other's hands now," I said, but they seemed not to hear.

The light from my windows was shifting. In half an hour, there would be inky darkness where Janet was supposed to be, and if I opened my curtains for the last of the

light, poor Mrs. Goldblatt would see far more than she needed to.

“He must be a very great man,” Janet breathed. “And you are very, very brave.”

I pulled over a kitchen chair, threw my legs across it, sat with my chest against the back. This kind of thing has been known to take a while.

“I’m not brave. Sometimes we have to look at ourselves, see ourselves for what we are, and act on it.”

“That’s so true.”

I watched them through the viewfinder. Janet, her eyes radiating heat and wonder, looked only at the top of Marvin’s head. They made plans for dinner. I cleared my throat, but it was obvious I would be dining alone.

“Do you think I ...” Janet said, and before she could finish the sentence, Marvin bent forward from the waist.

“Gently,” he said. “They’re still tender.”

Her fingertips lightly stroked his antlers. I was amazed; she didn’t squeal again.

“How big will they get?”

“I don’t know. Several feet, I imagine.”

They went on like that for half an hour more. The hot spot crept across the floor. I felt as though I’d walked into a movie theater during the second reel of an Andy Hardy film, the part where Mickey Rooney was undergoing his first glandular rush and instead of getting it on, he and Judy Garland decided to take all that hormonal energy and do a show. I toyed with my camera until Marvin left us.

“Isn’t he wonderful?” Janet breathed. “Why didn’t you tell me about him?”

“Janet, the man thinks he’s a moose. Nobody is a moose. I am not bragging to people that I have a neighbor who thinks he is a moose.”

“Keeping him to yourself. I get it. Did you see how he looked at me?”

“Janet, we’re talking about Marvin. Marvin doesn’t look at other people. The only thing Marvin sees is Marvin. His vision stops at the end of his nose. This is Marvin we’re talking about. Believe me, I know. You were standing there stark naked, and he didn’t notice.”

“That’s what’s so wonderful.”

* * *

Two weeks later, Marvin’s antlers had grown to six inches each. He’d begun to

walk with a slight stoop. In the late afternoons, through the apartment house wall, I could hear him bellowing and prancing about on all fours. We could hear furniture being knocked over. Mrs. Goldblatt heard it, too, and wanted to know if my neighbor was maybe sick. I reassured her.

They gave him a raise at the drugstore. Who would rob a place that was protected by a Harvard-educated moose?

One afternoon we went to Riverside Park and we gathered sticks from which he wanted to gnaw the bark in the privacy of his apartment. But the afternoon he asked me to accompany him to the zoo, I refused. "Think of my reputation," I said, and he pursed his lips and agreed.

At work, I asked Janet how the romance was going, and she said that they had reluctantly dropped it off. Though they had been completely in love, Marvin saw no future for them. As a moose emerging from a man's body, Janet could be no more than a transition woman for him, and so out of consideration for her, and because he respected her far too much to allow that, despite the fact that she had been willing to make any sacrifice, they broke it off. "Unconsummated," she whispered to me, which is how in Wisconsin they say, *We did not get laid*.

Two days after she told me that, Janet quit working at the restaurant because she got the part of the Marion the librarian in a nude production of *The Music Man* that opened in Brooklyn. Her rendition of "Goodnight My Someone," won raves, and the fact that she looked like a naked Elle Macpherson circa 1980 did not hurt, but I never went to see it. It would have broken my heart.

I bought Marvin a hat, genuine Stetson, brown felt, with a sweatband.

"I don't need a hat."

"Just wear it when you go outside."

I had grown tired of pink and mauve. It wasn't doing anything for me, so at the expense of a few more brain cells, I'd painted all my rooms different shades of green and had invited Marvin in to see my rain forest. It started out as a project to match the color of my rose tattoo, but you know how it goes. So many shades, so little time...

As I showed him my green paint job, Marvin turned down my offer of a hat. I poured Marvin wine, but Marvin insisted on drinking only water which had been melted from ice. He kept a supply in his refrigerator, freezing it first, then melting it. And he drank it from a saucer. He wouldn't consider crackers, but went in a big way for some sunflower seeds.

"The apartment is nice. Green is such a comfortable color, don't you think? Do

you think you can get some rattan furniture? It's my favorite. All that straw."

"You'll wear the hat?"

He was staring out my window at the brick wall. "I'd love some real companionship." He saw me grimace. "I mean kin, Bel. Sorry. You know, moose have no rights. Even the language doesn't grant a moose his dignity. What is the plural of 'moose?'"

"'Moose.' It's like 'deer' and 'sheep.'"

"That's what I mean. No distinction. How can a baby moose grow up feeling special? What do you think of 'meese?'"

"Marvin, what does your family think about this? I mean, you have a family somewhere, right?"

He helped himself to some watercress and then looked directly at me. "My family? Sure, I have a family. I was the third of four children, the only moose, and they were horrible about it. My father used to take us to the seashore, and my brothers and sisters swam, but I sat beneath an umbrella next to my mother and helped her make creamed-cheese and grape jelly sandwiches. All I wanted was the raw fruit. I hate the beach. It's too open. My older sisters made fun of me. By the time I was a teenager, my younger brother beat me at every sport. That drove my father crazy. He wanted me to play football. They wouldn't understand. They couldn't."

When he bent his face into his hands, I saw the antlers. I really wished he would wear the hat. "All I ever wanted to do was gambol!"

Marvin never accepted my hat. I still have it.

* * *

Just after Labor Day, Marvin vanished for three weeks. I found the key to his apartment in an envelope that he had slipped under my door. There was a note asking me to collect his mail and water his plants. Especially the plants.

Marvin got very little mail—sweepstakes fliers, an advertisement for a cemetery plot, magazine subscription bargains. Nothing personal. His apartment was poorly furnished. The floors were bare wood. He had several potted palms. Large and graceful, they required a good deal of water. I sprayed them with a mister.

I painted my apartment a third time, certain that five shades of blue would change my attitudes and my luck. I was getting efficient at changing my surroundings. When I did the closet, I did it fast enough that I didn't get woozy.

But I must have been out of my mind with loneliness; even before Marvin returned, I went from blue to earth tones. It was fall. Browns and oranges felt right. Around the corner at the Benjamin Moore store, the clerk gave me a contractor's discount.

Feeling restless, with the excuse of needing to buy film, one evening I visited Marvin's drugstore. They told me that Marvin had given notice, but didn't I think it was wonderful, his being a moose and all? They felt flattered to have known so determined an individual. The homely girl behind the checkout counter had shy eyes, and while I spoke to the manager about Marvin, she seemed wistful and vulnerable. I was filled with self-pity, but she seemed filled with longing and loss. What, I asked myself, could a woman have wanted with a moose?

Toward the end of September, I awakened one morning to hear the welcome sounds of gamboling through the walls. I'd missed Marvin. I threw on a robe for propriety's sake before I went to his door.

"Belinda!" He hugged me. His arms were covered by soft brown hair. At first glance, you'd have thought Marvin needed a shave, but in fact his face was also becoming masked by pelt. And Marvin smelled of wood smoke and pine.

He saw my nose wrinkle. "That's the hormones," he said. "They're working." His voice had deepened. Marvin invited me in and apologized for having nothing but ice water to offer me.

"You've been to Perlmutter's again?"

"Of course." He spun around. "In residence. The doctor is writing a paper about me,"

Marvin wore only a white tennis shirt and black shorts. Soft hair covered his feet and legs. His antlers had grown to at least a foot. He looked like an animated hat rack. But he spun around so I could see where through a small incision in the seat of his pants his tail drooped. It looked like a braided rope.

"I haven't got articulation, yet. Doctor Perlmutter says that will come in time. In a few months, I'll be able to wave my tail."

"Marvin, think. Could you be taking this too far?"

"Too far? How can you say that? I know I'll never be a complete biological moose. I wish I could take it farther. I'll never be able to impregnate a cow. No little moose feet pattering in the moss. I'd love that, but it's just not in the cards. Group sessions are so valuable for coming to terms with certain realities." He flipped his tail with his hand.

Curiosity overwhelmed. “Marvin? How did they do that?”

“Silicone.”

“Don’t people stare at you on the street? Doesn’t that bother you?”

“I haven’t noticed, but what does it matter? After this afternoon, my real life begins.”

And so Marvin told me about the photo session scheduled with *Notorious*. They came that day, two photographers and an interviewer, and they spent six hours with him. I have to give Marvin credit; while I was hanging around with my tongue lolling, he mentioned that his friend Belinda was a photographer. And the guy from *Notorious* was eager when he asked me if I had any pictures of Marvin before the changes, or any during the earlier stages. He and the rest of the crew took a break and went over to my place, and I looked through the shoeboxes of stuff I had, handing them all to him, one picture at a time.

I didn’t have a single shot of Marvin. He’d been changing in front of me while I’d been changing my apartment walls.

They made appreciative noises, and that was that.

The spread hit the stands two weeks later. Of course, you know what happened after that; Oprah, Jimmy Kimmel, the book, Charlie Rose, the radio talk show tour, and then that dreadful nightclub act that blessedly played only a week in Atlantic City. You remember the costumes they had the chorus girls in? Most people think that it bombed, but actually Marvin’s agent—Freddy Horowitz—had had an offer for Marvin to go to Vegas. Freddy Horowitz had big plans for Marvin.

The week after the Atlantic City closing, Marvin told me about them. It was in November. We were in my place again, recently done in shades of gray, which I was sure was finally going to do it for me. Gray—like I felt inside.

“My family wants me to come home.”

“Are you going?”

“No.”

“Oh, Marvin, give them a chance.”

“They never gave me one”

“Have you spoken to Perlmutter about this?”

“Yes. He agrees. I need a clean break with my life.”

“What is it, Marvin? What’s got your goat?”

It was a lame joke, but he smiled, vaguely, fleetingly.

“Freddy. He means well. I’m sure. He’s a good agent. We’ve signed for the merchandising. Antler hats. The personality poster. There’s even a paperweight. You know, the kind where you turn it over and snow falls through the water?” He absently chewed a bit of parsley plucked from Mrs. Goldblatt’s window box.

“You’re not happy.”

I told you. Marvin was a sad man. Sorrow hung on him like draperies. The antlers, the tail—Marvin was still Marvin. That blank American vulnerability still lurked beneath his furry face so quick to smile, right above the flap of skin that had begun protruding from below his chin. Maybe Marvin had always been a moose, but he’d also always been Marvin. I knew his problem. While I’d changed exteriors, he’d been changing interiors, and neither of us was done.

But when he told me what he wanted, I argued with him. It was crazy, I told him, and I was adamant. Marvin looked betrayed, the strongest emotion ever to cross his face. “So what if it’s crazy?” he said. “So what? It’s what I want, Belinda. Will you help me?”

I struggled with that. What was it to me if what he wanted was crazy? Marvin was my friend. At least he knew what he wanted; I had no right to argue.

I agreed to help.

He grinned. “Look,” he said. “I can move my tail a little.”

* * *

And so, two days later I found myself at 4:30 in the morning behind the wheel of a rented Ford Taurus. It was the widest car we could afford. Marvin’s antler’s spanned five feet.

Before we left the city, Marvin had me drive to the CVS where he’d worked. The streets were quiet. I sat in the car. From darkness I watched past the tall windows into the cold neon lit drugstore and saw Marvin gently embrace the homely cashier. Maybe Marvin was not as self-centered as I had thought. They exchanged a few words, and when she turned her back to him. Marvin called to her, but she stood with her arms crossed, shaking her head “no.” He shrugged, and walked to the door. But just as the door swung open to him, she spun about, called his name, and ran to him. They embraced again, this time hard, and for decency’s sake, I had to look away.

Then Marvin was in the car. “I’m ready,” he said.

By three that afternoon, we were passing over the flat plains of Ohio. Marvin sat in the back seat because if he sat beside me his antlers were a nuisance. As long as he slouched, I could see out the rear-view mirror. He slept a lot, hardly noticing the scenery. When he drove, even though the weather was cold, the side window had to be opened to make space for his antler, and so I had to sleep in the back seat with a blanket. We stopped only for fuel and long enough for me to bring something to eat back to the car from a truck-stop. We alternated five-hour shifts behind the wheel. By dead of night, we passed south of Chicago, and in the small hours of the morning, the sun rising behind us, we crossed the Mississippi. The Ford rolled easily over the gentle hills of Iowa, and then onto the flat brown prairie of Nebraska, the farms barren and covered by wisps of blowing snow, a harsh land beneath the meager winter sun. We headed into the Colorado foothills and north, and, when we crossed into Wyoming, Marvin became restless in his seat, fidgeting like a six-year-old.

He wanted to enter Yellowstone at night, and so we waited for three hours, sitting in the car.

I was exhausted, but Marvin was filled with anticipation. I couldn't sleep. We talked. I asked Marvin if he was certain. He was. You could hear it. He was a changed man—a changed moose. I couldn't doubt him anymore. It was difficult to distinguish the words he uttered, but of the note of happiness that hovered within the rasp of his deepening voice. was unmistakable. He'd worked from the inside out to become what he knew he was meant to be.

He asked me what color I might settle on for the apartment. I thought about it. "It doesn't matter," I said, and I saw how that had to be true.

The sun quickly fell behind the mountains, night rapidly gathered, and we were swallowed by the profound shadows of the American West. I drove into Yellowstone. At one point, while I nervously waited in the car, Marvin got out to swing open a gate on which was a sign: NO AUTO TRAFFIC PAST THIS POINT. The two-lane blacktop became gravel, and the gravel yielded to dirt, a rutted road crawling up the steep face of a mountain. Trees loomed in the darkness, their tops black and mysterious against the half moon that shone in the crisp clear air of that November night. The car crept up the trail, the only sound the crunch of its tires on fallen pine needles and the patina of snow, until the trail became too narrow. I shut the engine, turned off the headlamps, and the forest enveloped us.

I could go no further with him.

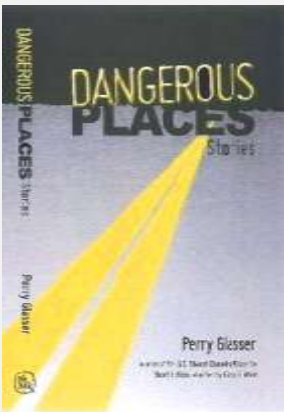
I swung my arm over the seat of the car and faced my friend. "This is it," I said.

He did not speak, but I think he smiled as he touched my arm. Then, carefully,

soundlessly, he opened the door and stepped from the car into a world fragrant with pine.

Marvin removed his shirt and threw it fluttering to the ground. He stepped from his trousers and lifted his face into the night air, a soft breeze hardly stirring. By the moon's silvered light, I could see the pelt grown thick on his chest and flanks. He went twice about the car, his nose high, the antlers casting deep lines of shadow onto his shoulders. At a point just before me, he froze, stood stock still a moment, and then went a few feet from the car off the trail into the forest. He paused long enough for me to make out his silhouette. I realized I had not brought my camera; I was glad I had not.

Marvin was still for several minutes, and then his shoulders hunched, he curled into a crouch, there was a rustle of leaves, and he slipped safely into the folds of the thick night and the life he had created.



Perry Glasser is the author of three short fiction collections, the most recent of which, *Dangerous Places*, is now available at Amazon and bookstores everywhere.

Readers curious about this story's strange origins and history, should send an email to perry "at" perryglasser.com