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## Moose Cafe

David McGrath  
*College of DuPage*

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## MOOSE CAFÉ

On Monday the old man arrives for a late breakfast at the Moose Café, in Hayward, Wisconsin. He nods to the cashier on the way in and chooses a booth adjacent the window on Iowa Street. He sets a small chunk of carved wood on the scratched vinyl surface of the table. The only other occupied table in the dining room is against the wall on the opposite end of the room, where two men hunker across from each other, drinking coffee.

The man facing him is large, over six feet, around 260 pounds. Not sloppy fat, but beefy. The old man has seen him around the reservation but doesn't know his name. He is hatless, short black hair, dark skin, a pock-marked face, a wide grin—he is not shy about his missing front tooth. He bulges through a Green Bay Packers tee shirt, jeans cinched up under his belly, and brown, pointed cowboy boots. He leans forward over the table, his swollen right hand around the coffee mug—it's certain none of his fingers would fit through the handle. His tone to his smaller friend is confiding, but the old man still has good ears and can't help hearing their words in the late morning calm of the restaurant.

"Man, I am starving," he says. "I don't remember if I ate last night."

The big man smiles at his coffee. The other with his back to the old man, nods. He appears slight, maybe 130 pounds. Visible above the bench seat is his yellow baseball cap behind which droops his crow-black hair, bound with a thin leather strap into a pony tail about eight inches long.

"You seen her, I know," the big man says. "Skinny, big brown eyes. She come over

from Minneapolis, had this baby with her. Little baby."

The waitress brings their orders: a stack of toast for the smaller man, and two plates for the other — eggs and hash browns, and an order of biscuits and gravy. The talker shakes the vial of hot sauce over his eggs.

"She asks me to take her out, show her around. That was, you know, when I just started at Weyerhaeuser, and I tell her I ain't got a check yet. She says no problem, she'll ask somebody else."

He grins at his friend, and they both laugh. Not loud — chuckling acknowledgment of a shared insight.

"Ma'am, we have some ketchup?" he called to the waitress. She delivers ketchup for his potatoes before taking the old man's order. The big man glances at the old man, whispers something to his partner, and they both laugh.

"So we go to the Swede's that night, you know, on County E, and I ask what about her kid, and she says she's got a baby-sitter. And I ask who, and she says Sandra. So she's here only one day, and she already knows Sandra and Nancy Nightsky and the 'Weasel.' You know *that* group."

The old man raises his head after 'Nightsky.' He hears the small one make a sound and the other nods rapidly and continues.

"Yeah, yeah. We're talking and drinking, and, you know, it's cool. Then she goes from Old Style and starts on vodka and grapefruit juice, says" and here he mimics in falsetto — "how the fuck do you think I keep my

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girlish figure?’ and I’m thinking, holy shit, man.”

The small one shakes his head, and the big man goes on.

“Wayne and Mickey from New Post, they come in there and sit down at our table. We’re all partying, man, and she, you know, she’s like the fucking princess.”

The waitress pours more coffee for them, and they are silent. She leaves and arrives shortly with the old one’s breakfast. He looks past her shoulder. The big man is eating.

“Shit, man, maybe we should lay off tonight,” and they laugh conspiratorially.

The old one eats too fast. There is quiet. He lays down his fork and sits perfectly still.

“It’s getting that time, you know, and I tell her let’s go. She says not yet. I tell her, what about your baby, an’ she says don’t worry, it’s not your fucking baby. So that’s it, I say, ‘let’s go *now*’.”

The old man’s hands and his eyes are on his blue cup. He can hear the crackle and squeak of his red vinyl bench seat from across the room.

“She starts in with ‘pussy,’ right in front of everybody, and then ‘faggot,’ and I kinda laugh it off. Then she says, ‘I’m staying, cuz I want to fuck these two. And I’m going to fuck them right in front of you.’ So I’m like to knock down the door on the way out, but I stand up and shove past her, is all. And that’s what the sheriff calls ‘battery.’”

The waitress comes back, but they want no more coffee. The other voice asks for the check. She circles to the old man’s table, but his cup is full.

“So I am staying at my Auntie’s house. They look for you about a week, you know. After that, forget about it. What’s it say in the treaty, there?”

The smaller man reads the guest check.

“Leave her the twenty. Don’t look like she’s getting rich this morning.”

They slide out of the booth. Their laughter dissolves as the door closes behind them. The old man sits alone in the dining room.

Slowly he rises and moves towards the cashier’s stand, keeping his eyes on the floor. The cashier is penciling something on the top of a stack of green and white guest checks when she notices him.

“That was fast, Louis,” she says, taking his money. “Say hey to Theresa from me,” she says. “I hear she’s up from Minneapolis with your grandkid.”

He raises his eyes to meet hers, then looks past.

“You have a great day,” she says, going back to her pile of checks.

The old man walks to the door and pauses. He stares through the window at nothing outside.

The waitress has moved to clear the table and finds what appears to be a child’s toy. She picks it up and sees it’s a wood carving of a miniature bear. Its ears aren’t yet finished. She turns, but the old man is gone.

— David McGrath