



ADAM MOORAD

The Land of Moose and Wolves

MOORAD

The Latitudes never cease to amaze. It's something I miss whenever I'm home. You'll be at a red light and look up, and in the bed of the truck in front of you you'll have a trophy bull with his tongue hanging out and legs tied up. He looks so peaceful, you might think. Then the lights change, and the truck guns it north. The further you go, the wilder it gets, there, any idiot with bullets can be mayor for life, a sort of no man's land where anyone takes whatever. It gladdens my heart.

I went to Wisconsin for a wedding, which was stupid because all I packed was my camping gear. I was a full season into a bender, give or take, and ripe for another. I didn't have much in the way of options. There'd been passings in the family, and I'd been married in the city to a spunky little girl who talked reverse and was always grinding her teeth whenever she smiled. I think she finally gave up, because she came home one day and wouldn't look at me or let me touch her. We'd been

drinking quite a bit wine during this period. It gums up you days; I can vouch for that. After a while, you kind of just stop being.

Loan was invited to the wedding. We knew the groom from our college days in Indiana. He lived in Los Angeles but was working too hard in the Pacific Northwest. He told me he'd hop a plane and meet me in the Latitudes a few days before the vows for some "adventure," and that he would go anywhere and for as long as it'd take, so I went air bound through the flatness of the Great Lakes – gnarled whorls of land striped with soot and wharf – sipping Merlot in the aisle of a Boeing with an Asian exchange student who spoke no English and who didn't seem understand the odor on my breath, and, in a giggly haze that some have in flight from the realities of life, I found my way to Milwaukee.

Loan screwed up his ticket and landed the morning before me. He teamed up with some yokels and spent the day at a ballpark scoring free Duck Tape. I found him half-rotten at my arrival gate twelve hours later. He stood and put his arm around me, and he said, "Boy, do you look like shit." We went off down the concourse and stood in a garage, waiting for our rental car to appear, which took hours. I'd been in Wisconsin for what seemed like an entire night and all I'd seen was the Hertz,

and Loan had been blacked out for most of it. We drank mightily and drove around a while and eventually found the highway north. Loan held a compass out and aimed the needle at the Latitudes. We had some catching up to do, because he too was married, and for some reason his wife ran off to Las Vegas with a much ado about nothing rapper named Lil' Nug, and we got blind and cussed and dipped a few plugs of Skoal, and somehow found our way to my aunt and uncle's house in a sort of green lake community before dawn where we had to use our manners. I suppose my aunt and uncle had been waiting up all night. But we made it, and they were happy to see us.

The next day stunk from the get-go. Two manure trucks pulled out in front of us and we were stuck behind them for some time. It reminded me of home, and I cried inside a good deal in the deaf way long-distance fashions. Great births of static rip through the gutless parts of the brain with that brand of reflection. If you've never talked to a widow on the phone not long after her husband has passed, then you don't truly know how long silence can become. There's a death in every unspoken second that moves with loss when it's your mother's. You can just smell the deflated thoughts float in through the window.

Loan gave up on the radio when we hit the coast. I was in the driver seat pushing 100 mph through the

Latitudes, this time sipping a Miller 64. My aunt had offloaded a garbage bag of it on us, the light stuff that doesn't get you drunk but somehow leaves a hangover. The road and the Michigan shoreline moved in unison. Our speakers crackled. I should have been awaker.

This is fucked up: Loan and I were standing beside a giant rock on Lake Superior four miles from our car when a thunderstorm hit. The rock looked like a chapel with a tall, deciduous tree growing out of it. I wasn't wearing anything waterproof, and the rain settled on me, dragging my body down in the wet junk of air. We made it back to the Hertz drenched, the drizzle constant as ever, and decided to abandon our camping plans. There'd be other trips, we told ourselves. Retreat is tough to stomach but, to be honest, I couldn't have cared less. A methy woman rear-ended us at a red light outside Escanaba, Michigan. She went hysterical claiming her father had just died and she was on her way to the church to make arrangements. She said, "There is so much to do around the house. The house is a mess. My fiancé is chopping wood. I don't have a driver's license." I guess she poked a hole in the Hertz' bumper and we weren't taking any chances. We called the cops. She called her fiancé. As the minutes passed, I stood there looking at Loan trying to convey to him with only my eyes that things could and

probably would become extremely violent should the fiancé arrive before the law. The woman cried in that gravelly tone the bereaved have, messing her hair, which looked unwashed but cooperative, and I was like, alright I guess she wasn't lying.

There was a lot more, but I don't remember. We ate a Subway sandwiches and hauled ass south until we hit the state line. Loan was a Triple-A member. He booked us a room at a Quality Inn Suites in a border town over the phone as I drove. A boy with a teardrop tattoo smoked a cigarette with a few stray cats outside the adjacent unit. We locked up our luggage and hit the bar and tried talking to strangers. I don't know, we were in the mood for something native.

The only real friend we made was Connie. She didn't count our drinks. She was hideous. Her skin was near the same color of a lung. I'm not sure how she had come to know the biker named Rodney, but I think she was afraid of him. I bought him a Bud in a gesture of good will and he screamed about his neighbors, and he held up his hands and made fists like he was squeezing something hard, and he told us he'd take his neighbors' Adam's Apples and make "apple sauce." His arms were shaking. It was the kind of wrath you didn't mess with. I got the notion he'd kill me if he conjured an association

between any one of his enemies and me; it was scary. He worked at a windmill factory. A large, redheaded girl drank something gold from a half pitcher and slapped a racket-sized flyswatter on the bar anytime she sensed a buzz. I didn't really have much to say. I was a tourist in the Latitudes. I felt sort of flat and underwater, afraid that if I opened my mouth too much, my deep and seedy thoughts would fall out. Connie talked about craps and cheese curds, how the good ones "squeak" when you bite into them. She asked if we gambled as she bruted about with a wet rag. Yeah, come to think of it, she could have been a he.

The next morning I was riding shotgun in the Hertz, this time more confused than I'd ever been on the road, sitting completely stiff drinking coffee, watching the spinach fields blur in the daylight as we cruised, the sky burning so bad you'd think the sun an eye looking at you alone.

From that point on, the trip became a vicious, drunken nightmare. We both went completely to pieces. The main problem was our prior association with the State of Indiana, which naturally led to meetings with old friends and relatives, many of whom were in the process of falling apart, going mad, plotting breakups, and cracking under the strain of terrible debt and addiction. Right in

the middle of the whole frenzied action, I was a member of a wedding party. This added a certain amount of strain to the situation, but since I'd arrived, I had no choice but to take whatever came my way.

I did a little speech at the rehearsal dinner and damned if I didn't imagine my wife rise up unexpectedly from the sea of people to hold my hand while I was speaking, but afterward, while extended family members nitpicked trays of fancy desserts and the bridesmaids and other groomsmen staggered around uneasily, I remembered I was getting divorced, but it hadn't finalized, and maybe that was a sign, though I didn't want any part of that thought. I was mad as hell, but it felt good when the priestess came up to me and said my speech had struck a chord in her, a truth resonating deep down, like no one else's speech had.

If you're like me, then you're not one for a lot of people. Especially not at weddings. Especially not in the Latitudes. In the build up to the trip, I'd spent a few months walking around the Hudson Valley, getting stoned and somehow showing up on the summit of a mountain the next morning, trying to feel something, but all my clothes were soggy and the only things I thought were derived from chemicals, and all I wanted was for something to hold me, to pull me into the fluid it lived inside,

to keep me warm with its warmth, to sing songs to me as I took mental pictures of all life being lived, the horizon hissing with the purple wonder of infinity.

If you went out dancing that night in Wisconsin, you'd see the strangest thing. You'd see my choreography. I don't know where all those wide bottomed people came from, but they arrived in slews, and I synchronized myself to their dips and gyrations, a room of them wagging their tongues in a froth of satisfaction, putting their hands above their heads and spinning, their hair miraculously steady as we moved in then out of tune. To live and delight in healing, flying, fucking. Here are the men and women.

I decided not to shower, so I put my tuxedo on in the heat. I don't even know who tied my tie. I'm serious. Loan might have actually had to Duck Tape it around my neck. I entered the next afternoon on a dare to myself. A show of white collars lingered in the hotel lobby. We rode one of those faux trolley rigs into the hills where decorative corns lulled from pygmy stalks, and there was a Dixieland band playing the best music I'd ever heard, bar none, and I sat at a table and drank a champagne, and it felt like a slice of something special for a while. Wisconsin smells like fresh water, and I wandered into an arbor and called my wife who humored

me for about three minutes and hung up. If there were a bridge, I would have jumped, and swam around some, but instead, I ate a packed lunch in some kind of artisanal barn and made myself puke in an air-conditioned out-house, then I walked down the aisle.

People looked differently to me from the altar. I think they could tell that I'd been burning off something bitter, and I went along with the ceremony, tipsy as I could stand and stumbled up to people afterwards and introduced myself, but everyone rolled their eyes. They looked like muscular, burnt virgins who strutted properly in a vehement gait; they wore traditional Ethiopian dress briefed down to the ankles, with leather sandals that put you in a mind of escape. So I started dancing in a silly and ferocious way and scalped my head on the grill of a small African. He was just a boy, about twelve. Blood was pouring out of my head, but no one seemed to care. The whole ordeal just chuffed me, and I decided I'd get blunt. I was taking pictures of myself in the mirror with my phone while the best man, a doctor from Louisville, dabbed the hole in my head with paper towels, and I was wondering what the hell was happening, because the way I looked you would've thought I'd done something horrible in a previous life, shaded in a pity I never hoped to see.

"You've got to stop this drinking," the doctor said.

I nodded. "I know. This is no good, no good at all. But for some reason it makes me feel better..."

As soon as I clotted, I decided *fuck it* – well I think I had actually decided fuck it on the plane to Wisconsin, but only then did it feel real – and I tipped my cup, and a crowd of tuxedos descended upon me, and I was howling like a wolf, "Where am I going? What have I done?" as the pack whisked me from the barn.

I couldn't be in the Latitudes anymore.

The trolley ride back to the hotel pitched me around a bit, but I didn't break any bones, and in the morning I woke up in a sulphurous room and there was blood on my pillowcase and scabs in my hair and some glitter. After I soaked in the tub in that irritable way liquid bubbles against raw skin, I started packing for the airport. Loan took the keys, and he drove back to Milwaukee with a steadfast Midwestern gaze as it rained. But the adventure wasn't over until we ditched the Hertz, so we pulled in and grabbed our luggage and left my aunt's trash bag of beer in the trunk. An enormous clerk in a grapefruit polo gave the ride a once over. I was feeling nervous and decided to come clean, and I told him we'd been in a "minor fender-bender up north." I showed him the hole the woman had poked. He wheezed a little and, considering

the unwanted paperwork, handed me my receipt, and he said, “Don’t worry about it, sir. Have a nice flight.”

We flew through security and took to the first tavern on the concourse. I don’t know how many bubbles popped in my beer, but I’m guessing it was thousands. My bag looked nice, emblazoned with a dozen or so patches so people got good look at where I’ve been, completely useless information, but at least I had something going for me. I wished I had another patch that said “Fuck Tourists” in big block letters, but I think that was just fatigue getting in the way, because I’m proud of where I’ve been. The tap ran out, so I hopped a plane east, Loan west. What were we going home to? Did we really know?

I get giddy often when I think of how night rolls in on the Latitudes, with all those bumpkins chopping wood and crawling into their jalopies. I pause at a red light. A lone wolf calls out from the boreal wood. My eyes water. All it does is make me really sleepy. I wonder, whenever I enter those wilds, will I make it out? Some do, but surely some don’t. The funny thing is: I’m still here and very much alive.