

Buck

His wife's newly bought Muskoka chairs are quite comfortable for Mr. Elk, as he lays lazily on his back overlooking the sleepy Melgund Lake from his porch. With the weekly newspaper in his lap, he quickly flips through the pages with his cloven hooves desperately trying to stumble upon something of interest. Mrs. Elk had left the day before, departing with a bingo partner of hers to accompany some others south of the border for a few days of shopping in the land of the free. They've all known each other since elementary school – a reunion of sorts. Two things which couldn't be farther from Mr. Elk's liking, materialism, and spending time with others, however, he was not one to ruin his wife's fun and had promptly slipped her a large sum of cash when she departed.

Mr. Elk, although he adores his wife, is admittedly enjoying his first day of listening to nothing but the sound of birdsong in his home, coupled with the periodic interjections of Mr. Elk's beloved neighbourhood owl. Neighbourhood, albeit is a strong word for a peninsula that consists of only his unimpressible abode, surrounded by water on three of its sides and kilometres of uninhabited forest on its fourth. He would label himself as a hermit if it weren't for his abandonment of God and monthly visits to the

bookstore in town when his shelves were feeling a bit dull. There he could be seen warding off friendly store employees trying to aid in his search for fear of judgment, and occasionally wishing the cashier a lovely afternoon if the timing felt right. He considers this plenty enough for the bucks in the bingo hall to not mistake his wife for a widow, since he certainly does not see the joy in making an appearance each week. It's hard to expect additional extraversion from a published author, who makes his living alone. He has no problem finding all the inspiration he needs in his home.

"Coups attempt in Lithuania, Vilnius occupied by extremists. Plane crashes in the Atlantic. Thirty thousand humans protest working conditions in Dresden." he murmurs to himself while revisiting the newspaper. "Quite the collection of bleak headlines. If only humans could still read, maybe they'd be moved by what's going on in Dresden, but I don't understand what sort of sympathy the columnist is trying to pry out of elks. We were hunting humans in the forest for sport a mere two decades ago. It's hard enough to have elks put down their rifles, let alone sympathise, and I fear that recent attempts to bring us closer have only torn us farther apart."

After a long day of lounging in the sun, Mr. Elk parts ways with its rays at dusk and makes his way inside. Every night he makes sure a fire is lit in his living room, and besides the eerie quietness of it, this night is no different. He gathers together a few birch logs, kindling, a matchbox, and the newspaper he had been sifting through that day. He arranges the logs in the fireplace the same way every night, and after doing

so giddily slips the now crumpled-up newspaper into the centre of his skillfully crafted log cabin. Funnily enough, though he's known to live each one worryless within the confines of his property, his favourite part of any given day is gently putting it to rest with a cold beer between his hooves. There's a twisted joy he finds in burning the daily news, trapping it in a fiery tomb, as if that would rip the day's events out from the past, leaving nothing but ash and the present. He would burn tomorrow's paper too, but he hasn't quite figured out where to find it. Bent underneath the decorative wooden mantel, he strikes the stone of the fireplace with a match and lights several pieces of the news, patiently waiting for an orange glow. With the fire now swiftly catching, he stumbles back while quickly lifting his head, knocking his antlers into the mantel above him, sending a sharp stinging sensation through his cervine skull.

"Agh fuck. You could've given me a heads-up or something. This is the third night in a row now. The next time I give it a proper whack I might think it's the first." he whines, staring at a human made of marble protruding out of the wall above the mantel. The marble man is attached to the wall by his waist, only possessing an upper body. He is young with curls in his hair and beard, a piercing cold gaze, broad shoulders, and a lean build much like the Greek statues of ancient human times. However, this man is not ancient. He was turned to marble long after Alexander the Great's conquests, frozen in time with his arms out in front of his face as if he was trying to catch falling snow in the palms of his hands when it happened.

"Sorry, that sort of thing doesn't cross my mind. I'm a man, after all, and antlerless. The only things that sprout from our skulls are thoughts, which we're quite proud of, as they leave us winding and weaving away. Though I suppose there are humans, flesh or marble, who wish for some thoughts to not sprout at all." says the man.

"Well, the purest of ones sprout from your mind, that's why I capture them in my notebook." Mr. Elk assures the man. "I'll never quite understand how you're able to float between them so elegantly, like a trapezist flying through the air."

"A trapezist? Where did you read that? I thought that human pastime was lost in history along with the rest of our culture after the elks won the Great War, slaying Castleberry Cutshaw." the man says inquisitively.

"I didn't read it, I heard it from you silly, don't you remember? I even included a trapezist in my latest novel, and the hilarity of it is everyone believes it's a creation of my own, like all I do is dream up fictitious things in the forest. Half the time I'm retelling bits of a history that was all too real; elks can be so blind to the truth." says Mr. Elk.

"Well, I suppose it's hard to give history lessons while being shot at." the man chuckles with distaste. "The flesh-covered humans of today know nothing of our history. Without literacy, it's difficult to pass down many things between generations, if only they were given education. Anyways, the lack of opposable thumbs makes an elk trapezist hard to believe."

“Ah yes, us elks are quite limited in that regard, but as of now your marble thumbs are about as opposable as mine, don’t you see the humour in that?” Mr. Elk snickers as he walks to the kitchen to grab another beer.

“Oh, I wish I could.” the man exhales sarcastically. “Maybe if you drink four more beers your jokes will become tolerable.”

“And maybe if you—“ Mr. Elk stubs his toe on the couch. “Fuck. Sometimes I wish I were marble. It would certainly hurt less each time I bumped into something. You know I can be a real clumsy guy—”

"You? Frozen in marble?" the man interrupts. "Simply for a hardened exterior? Oh please, rip me from this wall and gently lay my head in the fire beneath me where I can't hear this nonsense. The crimson that was squeezed from me at a ripe age, the marble eternity I have ahead of myself, this is what you envy?"

"Oh, relax will you, I didn't mean it in the literal sense. You know there's no blood on my hooves, you lost your flesh centuries before I was born. I saved you at that auction, that old elk only wanted to show you off during his dinner parties, while he blabbed on about how he and his cronies would continue to fuck with the humans who still have their flesh. I'm not a captor, I'm a liberator. Here at least, you have someone to talk to." replies Mr. Elk.

“Ah yes, someone to talk to. Someone to drain me of every last thought and pass it off to others like

it’s somehow original li-li-like you invent sliced fucking bread each and every year! Deep down in your fucking soul, you know you’re nothing without me, and your novels wouldn’t pay a damn bill if you were to write them on your own.” the man yells vehemently.

“Will you quit your bullshit? I’ve been writing for decades before I bought your sorry ass.” Mr. Elk yells back. “We simply have playful conversations, I don’t owe anything to you.”

“Then leave, won’t you? Leave! If you don’t need me, find inspiration and thoughts elsewhere! See how far those last two acorns rattling around your cervine skull will get you! Because if we’re being honest, you’re afraid of a world without me, so you spend your days here bothering me until your blue in the face, god you really are a fucking hermit.” the man sneers.

“Fine. Fine! I’ll leave. Maybe I’ll find some thoughts in the forest. All great artists draw inspiration from nature, don’t they? Let’s go for a walk.” Mr. Elk announces scornfully, smashing his half-empty beer bottle on the forehead of the man. He launches himself towards the man, and rips him from the wall, using a newfound boost in strength brought by adrenaline and drunkenness. He flings the man on his back and in a flurry of emotion scrambles towards the back porch door, angrily huffing and puffing, all the while the man remains entirely frozen, unmoving. Outwards swings the door as Mr. Elk runs through it, now sprinting down his porch stairs, murmuring about his artistic

independence and pride while the man is quietly along for this turbulent ride.

He continues to sprint faster and faster through the forest, while the man continues to remain silent until they finally reach Mr. Elk's dock on Melgund Lake. He takes the man past an old, moored pontoon to the very end of the long wooden dock, placing the man down and catching his breath, as the moonlight dances on the black waters surrounding them.

"A little midnight boat ride? How fun that would be for old time's sake." the man says nervously.

"I was thinking more of a midnight dip, and I'll play the part of a terribly neglectful lifeguard." Mr. Elk says, with the hoof of his right hind leg digging into the chest of the man, now laying prone on the edge of the dock.

"Forget what I said about drinking more beers let's just go inside and sleep this one off. You can't seriously be trying to rid me of your household, of your life." the man stutters. "You need me, you really do. You will be all alone in this world, and well, so will I."

"We will see. At least I'm mortal, loneliness can't possibly last forever. I suppose for this reason alone I wouldn't wish to be marble." Mr. Elk says pressing even more of his weight on the frozen marble man as if he could feel any pain. "Out of spite I'm going to drink a few more beers, and you my friend, are going to drink lake water for the rest of eternity." In one swift motion, Mr. Elk rolls the man off the edge of the dock with his hoof, and the sound of a large splash is carried

across the lake, waking critters of all kinds as it undulates through the northern air. He watches as the man slowly sinks to the bottom of the lake, while the now-rippled water reflects bits of moonlight into his eyes. He sits down, letting his hind legs dangle over the lake, watching as the water beneath his hooves starts to settle down. His eyes begin to wander as he finds himself looking up at the moon and stars, trying to see if he can find any patterns on this particular night.

"And to think Alexander the Great gazed upon the very same moon and stars. Troy, Tyre, Gaza, Alexandria, Babylon, Persepolis. Every day he faced a new trying conquest yet, every night I would like to think he found solace in the same night sky." Mr. Elk said softly to himself. "Explaining to my wife that the man was sold in the town over shouldn't be difficult. She won't raise concerns so long as I mend the wall he was pried from. To her, he was only ever another household decorative, another thing she dusted on the weekends. She never knew the man could speak. Now that I come to think of it, no one knew."