

## Head East

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We lumbered into the wayhouse in a cloud of bovine sweat, flies and oxen farts. I'd have pushed through, given my druthers, but the beasts were fighting me every step and I knew we'd have to spend the night. It hurt to stop here, so close to my goal, like stopping to retie your shoe with one toe on the finish line, but weren't nothing for it if the beasts wouldn't budge further.

Before I left Washton, I bartered away a nice van for this pair of grumpy oxen and an old U-Haul trailer with yokes attached. I named the pair Steak and Chops, and I planned to eat them once I got where I was going. The low roads were no place for a fancy van; nothing here but mud and ruts and nowhere to charge. And I couldn't take the Electroway; once you get on the Electroway and log your trip, they know who and where you are. The low roads are where bad wolves like me go to disappear. For reasons.

When I entered the wayhouse, the old badger who ran the house ran her eyes over me judgementally, but took my money and barked at me to go sit with the other guests if I wanted to eat. The other "guests" was just a young, clean-cut moose who looked awkwardly out of place. I knew I'd have to watch this one; good men don't travel the low roads.

I sat a table away from him and pretended he didn't exist until he broke the silence.

"Which way?" was all he said.

It was none of his business, but I didn't want to be rude. "Minnesota," I said.

"Coming from Washton?" he asked in a way I think he hoped made him sound casual.

"Ya."

"Bad stuff going down there, ya." He said. "I come from Minnesota originally. Had family there until ... you know."

"Ya," I replied. "That's rough. Sorry."

We were both quiet then until the server lass brought us bowls of watery vegetable stew and bread. I dipped my bread in the broth, and then offered the rest of the stew to the moose who gratefully took it.

“Minnesota,” he said again. “It’s a shame, you stopping the night here when you are so close to the finish line.”

“Ya,” I said. “Leastwise ‘til they move the line again, like they did in Washton.”

“You’re taking quite a load with you,” said the moose. “You moving all your stuff with you?”

“As much as I could put in that trailer, ya” I said cautiously. “I’m migrating, as it were.” It was packed with more medical tech than his life was worth, and I’d rather he glean no hint of that. I didn’t much like needless bloodshed. I took my pardon and retired to my room before he could ask any more awkward questions.

As soon as I got to my room, I slapped a topical stim pad into the bare patch under my armpit and quickly assembled my gun. As I settled into a chair by the window, I grimaced as I felt my heart begin to pound painfully in my chest. Each time you used one of these pads it took a year off your life. I should know, I’m a doctor. Mind you, every year medical science added another five, so at some point it had to balance.

The sun had just set when I saw the moose emerge from the wayhouse with another moose who was a bit shorter and rounder than him. As I feared, I saw them look around before making a beeline toward my trailer. I cracked the window and rested the muzzle of the gun in the opening so that I could get a clear bead if I needed it. I swiveled my ears to try and pick out their words, but they were talking in hushed tones, and I could only pick out key words. “...Washton...Minnesota...heathen...”

Aw fudge it, they were part of *that* crowd. They were probably on their way *to* Washton to join the crusade. “Don’t touch my trailer, boys,” I thought. I peered through the gun’s electronic sight and focused it on the back of the taller moose’s head. “Please don’t touch my trailer.”

I didn’t see what I did as wrong, and neither did the folks in Minnesota. Yet. I delivered happiness. I gave people what they want. A beaver boy wanted to be a fox. He had the desire, he had the money, I made him a fox. His folks didn’t take too kindly to that. If God had wanted their boy to be a fox, He’d have

made him a fox. It's also kind of illegal to change up species in Washton, but that just makes it more profitable. It was a don't ask, don't tell line of work.

The kid buckled under pressure and told, so now I'm migrating east.

*"Please don't touch my trailer!"*

I couldn't catch what the two moose were saying, but they laughed a couple of times then lit up a cigarette of some kind that they passed back and forth as they walked back to the wayhouse. I lowered the gun and slid back from the window lest they look up. It looked like a win-win night. I got to keep my trailer unmolested, and they got to keep their brains in their craniums.

I spent the rest of the night watching over my trailer and gathered up my oxen for the road again at first light. As far as I know the moose men were still sleeping when I left.

The oxen grumbled and moved with contemptuous recalcitrance when I tried to coax them up to speed. I tried to encourage the larger one with the crop, but that just elicited its first fart of the day.

"So help me, I'm going to cook you first," I scowled. "I hope you taste better than you smell."

Fortunately, it turned out that he did.