

HOWARD

The old man sat looking into the night sky through the bay window of his study while on a side table, his evening toddy was cooling. Mounted behind him on the mahogany-paneled wall hung a large moose head, A trophy from a long go hunting trip. Both the dead and the living eyes looked in the same direction, northwest towards the wilderness where they encountered one another decades ago. The trophy eyes pointed through the darkness towards home. The living eyes looked back to a night of terror. The man never ventured out of the house after sunset and always keep the lights burning, even while sleeping.

As was his habit old Howard Durant, spent evenings in his study reading the Bible. On his lap, it lay open to Lamentations 3:1 "I am the one who has seen the affliction by the rod of the Lord's wrath". "Poor Cornelius " he mumbled to himself. "If only you had believed. If only I had been stronger. He slowly shook his head as he spoke "Poor, poor Cornelius"

When he was nineteen, Howard Durant joined his father and group of leading men from his hometown for their annual moose hunt in Northern Ontario. They rode the train to Buffalo and there board the Canadian Pacific Railroad. After a day-long journey through the Canadian wilderness, they arrived at Greywolf Station. This was no station in a formal sense, only a crude platform, next to the mainline. A well-beaten path led through the woods to a tiny settlement on the south shore of Greywolf Lake. At Greywolf Lake they met the guides Henri and his son Baptiste Rabideaux, Metis who lived in an Ojibwe community on the south shore of the lake.

Greywolf was the first of a chain of lakes that stretch northward almost to through the Canadian shield towards Hudson's Bay. An easy day of paddling would bring a hunter to short portage to the much larger Bear Lake. It took a long hard day of paddling to reach the north end of that lake. There a short river wound into Raven Lake. The Natives could not say how large was Raven Lake because they feared to venture into it. They believed that the lake and its surrounding forest held a curse.

Howard's first hunt had been a great success. He took a large bull moose on the second day. One of the others shot a black bear and later a second moose. Two large whitetail bucks were added to their take. Another successful hunt and after two weeks in the wilderness the men boarded the train and returned home, happy and satisfied.

Howard returned to his university at the start of the winter semester and regaled his friends with stories of the northern wilds. While some believed Howard was foolish to take time away from school to wander around the uncivilized north,

many others thought Howard had a marvelous experience. One person who envied Howard for his hunting adventure was Cornelius VanderStee

Cornelius was a year older than Howard. He was a sion of an old and wealthy family from the Hudson Valley and his aristocratic bearing enamored Howard. Howard idolized

Cornelius had come to dominate Howard. In the spring Cornelius traveled through Europe and sent a letter to Howard telling him of all he saw and did there. At the end of the letter he wrote:

" I say this with some reluctance, old friend, but I became bored over in Europe. Looking at great art and huge cathedrals was tedious. This was especially so when surrounded by other wealthy American tourists. This grand tour seems to me to be one more class obligation, some necessary task to become a true sophisticate. I would prefer something with hardship and even danger. Something to put callouses on my hands and iron into my spine.

I look forward to seeing you soon old friend
Cornelius"

Howard immediately thought of asking his friend to come along on their annual fall hunt. So with his father's permission, Howard invited Cornelius. To join them in October for the hunt.

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That fall, Howard, his father, and three other men boarded the train to Buffalo. There they met Cornelius. Howard was very happy to see his idol. The Hunters upon seeing Cornelius exchanged concerned looks thinking "Would their close group of experienced hunters have to put up with a haughty misfit? Cornelius wore new tailor-made woolens, hand-sewn boots, and a Burberry Mackinaw. He proudly displayed his Italian rifle with a finely carved walnut stock. These trappings stood in stark contrast to the worn Woolwich jackets and well-used Winchester and Remington rifles the others possessed. Cornelius's every mannerism bespoke wealth and privilege. Even though he was the same height as the others he appeared to be looking down on the others. Cornelius addressed the men with a slight sneer as if he were speaking to a gardener on his estate.

The men in the group were soon put off by his arrogance. They rightly surmised that he had never done any physical labor in his life. Yet despite their mistrust, they gave him a reserved welcome and treated him with politeness. Cornelius blinded by arrogance had no idea that the men wished he had not come.

The train ride through the forest and bogs of Ontario was uneventful. Cornelius mostly slept until they arrived at Greywolf Station. At Greywolf, they met Henri and Baptist who lead them to their primitive lodgings. The ramshackle hut appalled Cornelius. He had never stayed in such rustic quarters and had never slept in a tent or used a latrine. The black flies and mosquitoes which were merely

a discomfort to the men, were torture for him. On the canoe trip up to the camp on Bear Lake, he complained about having to paddle a canoe for several hours and by the time he reached the portage to Bear Lake, his hands were painfully blistered. At the portage, he could not help carry the canoe and even had to ask Howard to help tote this gear. This discomfort only made him more determined to return with a large trophy moose or bear.

That year's hunt began with disappointment. During the first few days, Baptiste was only able to call in a small male moose which Henri said was too young to take. There were plenty of cows and calves but no large bulls. One of the men managed to shoot a medium-sized bear and the fishing was excellent. But the lack of trophy moose made the hunt unsatisfying.

One evening Baptiste, Cornelius, and Howard were sitting by themselves on the beach when Cornelius asked why no one ever went to Raven lake.

Baptiste said "The land around the lake has a curse upon it"

"Cursed what do you mean?" Asked Cornelius wringing his bow and stared skeptically at Baptiste

Howard spoke "Baptist, tell him about Raven Lake "

Baptiste was reluctant to tell Cornelius. He feared that Cornelius would not believe him or worse, mock him and his beliefs.

"It's OK, Baptiste," Howard said trying to assure him

Baptiste began with the warning the elders repeatedly gave the young men in the village "No one must ever go to the land around Raven lake and expect to come back unscarred, if at all." He then paused

Cornelius asked, " So Baptiste how did Raven lake become so spooky?"

Baptiste took a deep breath and looked to Howard

Howard said "Please tell my friend the legend"

Baptiste stood at the sand as he quietly spoke "Once the land around Raven Lake had many animals. The people of Raven Lake prospered but when the fur traders came down from Hudson's Bay, greed took hold of them. They trapped and hunted the animals, too many. Soon they had many guns, pots, iron hatchets, needles, brightly colored clothes, medallions, and long strings of beads but few pelts to trade. The traders stopped coming. One day their elders met in council. After much talk, all agreed that the people would have to move to other hunting grounds. New lands with more animals to trap, skin, and trade.

"The night after the elders met, A single bolt of lightning struck the forest across the lake. Soon flames began to rise amongst the trees. The fire spread. Raven Lake simmered then boiled. The firestorm consumed the village. The people could not escape. Their agonizing wails could be heard all across the northland."

"The fires burned throughout the summer and into the fall. We call it the days of no night. The shrieks of the dying lasted for months. The ground smoldered

all winter and in the following summer, the fires and the shrieking returned. After three years the fires died away. Then the winds came, twisting any new life into strange, eerie forms. This twisted and stunted forest grew upon a foul ground. It reeked of death. A terrible spirit rule that land We should not go there. Many of our people fear to even go to the northern end of Bear Lake."

"So if no one has ever been up there since the fires, How do you know that there is still a curse on the land?" Asked Cornelius

Baptist went on "Every few years, some young buck thinks he is smarter than our elders and sneaks off to Raven Lake. Some return, others don't. The ones that return are changed. They fear living in our forests. After a few days in the village, they flee the north woods, looking for safety in the big cities like Toronto or Winnipeg. They never come back."

Cornelius looked over to Baptiste with a smirk "That's a good story. I love legends and myths, Thank you"

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After four days and no sight of trophy game, the men began pressuring Henri to move up towards the northern end of the Bear Lake. At first, he would not agree. He acknowledged his fear of evil spirits. Behind Henri's back, the men mocked his fear, claiming they were simple superstitions. Henri eventually relented and agreed to set up a temporary camp mid-way up the lake. That was as close to Raven Lake as he dared to go.

At the new camp, the men took a large old bull. A fine trophy but that was the only moose they saw for three days. Surprisingly, Cornelius's discomfort with the wilderness began to abate. He began doing his share of the chores. His blistered hands were healing and nascent callouses were growing in their place. At night, around the fire, he seemed to enjoy the cheap rye whiskey that he would not deign to drink at home. Cornelius was no longer a burden upon the men. Despite this, his innate arrogance never abated and although the men were friendly towards him, he remained an outsider. Cornelius began to let the others know that dissatisfied with the hunt, He did not hide his need to bring home a trophy for his estate. "When will we find some game?" "I would very much like to shoot a moose." "I need very much to make a kill." "If I can't return with a trophy I will very disappointed."

On the evening of the sixth night, he quietly approached Howard "Howard, you don't believe this Indian superstition about evil spirits up north of here."

"No, but Henri and Baptiste do. I trust their judgment"

"Honestly, Do you believe all the falderal from illiterate bumpkins?"

"Well, they do know the forest."

'Yes, they know the forest but this evil spirit stuff is nonsense"

"Cornelius, What are you getting at?" Questioned Howard

"OK, so far the hunt has not been a success. We need to move to new grounds."

"New grounds, Like where?"

"Up north."

"Raven lake?" Asked Howard

"Ya, Raven Lake"

"But Henri and my dad say Raven Lake is off-limits."

"Listen, Howard, They don't need to know we went there. We will leave early in the morning and paddle north, looking for moose. If we see one and kill it, fine, we turn back - no visit to Raven Lake. But if we don't, we paddle into that lake, at most only a mile or two. No sign of moose, we turn back. If we get a moose there, we bring it back and say we shot it on Bear Lake. No one will know we got it in Raven Lake. You with me this?"

Howard pursed his lips and began to think. Cornelius saw his reluctance
"Howard, you're a college man, you can't believe this spirit nonsense"

"I aah don't "

"Then let's go. What do we have to lose?"

"Ok, but not a word about going to Raven Lake."

"On my honor, not a word, my friend"

Cornelius awoke before sunrise and nudged Howard. "Wake up buddy. Time to get our trophy moose."

Howard yawned and said nothing as he crawled out of his sleeping bag

Baptist was already up and had built the breakfast fire. On a pine branch above the cook shed perched two large black Ravens. The pair were waiting for Baptist to toss them a couple of morsels. Every year birds roosted above the camp and over time they had become accustomed to Baptiste providing breakfast. The birds would then fly back to the forest for the day and return in the late afternoon for dinner.

Baptiste said they came to the camp every fall to see who was hunting. He knew they could sense who was foolish and who wasn't. These ravens were much wiser than the hunters. It was their home, men were mere interlopers.

The boys ate a couple of biscuits, drank a cup of coffee, and then launched their canoe. They pushed off onto the glassy smooth waters. Mist was rising from the lake. Cornelius was in the stern where he could steer and control the direction of the canoe. Howard paddled in the bow. After they launched, Cornelius turned the canoe and steered northward.

Baptist stood on the shore and watched them as they vanished in the mist. He then saw the birds flying north above the lake. "They are not going into the forest," he thought. "This is strange"

After paddling for an hour, the mist disappeared. The sky became clear with only a few clouds hovering in the west. At mid morning, they turned the canoe toward a shoreline marsh and scouted it for a few minutes. Finding no sign of moose, they returned to their northward journey. A breeze had begun to raise small ripples on the lake. Howard noticed more clouds moving in from the west. "We may have to fight the wind coming back," He thought. By noon the sky was completely overcast and the breeze had picked up. The ripples became a chop. The wind had circled from the west to the south and pushed the canoe on its northward course.

They checked out a couple of other marshes but found no sign of game. Howard was thinking it was time to turn back, but Cornelius kept driving the canoe northward. Throughout the journey, the Ravens circled high above. But when the boys approached the end of Bear Lake, the birds flew north leaving the canoe behind.

A cool drizzle began to fall when they reached the outlet from Raven Lake. A few hours of daylight remained, yet the sky was becoming much darker as if nightfall was only minutes away.

Howard was anxious. He kept looking back to see if Cornelius was about to turn the canoe around. But Cornelius kept goading him on. Once in the river, the forest became noticeable quiet. The trees were smaller and the wind had stopped. Just as they began to round a bend, Cornelius looked ahead and spotted what appeared to be a very large moose.

"Shhh, Howard our trophy is up ahead. It is huge!" He whispered.

They quickly back-paddled and quietly moved to the bank. The boys crept forward, through the brush looking for a place to get a good shot at the animal.

Back at camp, the day had grown cloudy, cold, and dreary. Rain began to fall. At dinner time the wind had briefly shifted from the north. The men became concerned when the boys did not show up for dinner. A couple of men surmised that the boys went to Raven Lake. Henri walked to the lake to try and see if the boy's canoe was coming into camp. There he sensed a strange odor, a stench of rot and decay, a message telling him that the boys had arrived in the cursed land. The men did not notice the stench. Yet their worry grew.

In a couple of minutes, Cornelius found a fallen log where he could rest his rifle, aim, and get a clean shot at the moose. It was only about 20 yards away. The only problem was the view was partially blocked by some brush. Neither of them could see if it was a bull or a cow. Howard said "wait let's be sure" Cornelius was sure. "No cow could be that large." He ignored Howard and fired.

The moose dropped. Cornelius jumped up and ran to it. Howard followed. On the beach, lay a dead cow. Howard stood there dumbfounded. Cornelius tried to say something but his words were drowned by a loud bleating. A calf came out of the brush.

Howard yelled. "You shot a cow! A cow with a calf! The wolves will have the calf by tomorrow. I told you to wait. You fool! you goddamn fool!"

Cornelius was taken aback, Howard had never spoken to him like this before. He had never seen him angry.

"Get in the Canoe, We're going back to camp. Now!" Barked Howard

Then the wind exploded. It screamed in from the south, spun east, then north then west. A powerful whirlwind pinned the canoe against the bank, waves chopped the river in a boiling froth. The boys were trapped. Together they managed to drag the canoe up on the bank, tipped it over, and crawled under. They were cold and wet as they clung together for warmth.

The sky became black, pitch-black. Fear gripped them. Cornelius began to cry. Howard could say nothing, too frightened and angry to talk.

After what seemed like hours, the wind and the rain stopped. Everything was quiet, too quiet, tense. The sky was still pitch black. It was then that they first noticed the stench. They sensed that they were in the center of mass of rotting flesh. Flesh that had been decaying for years. Cornelius began to vomit. Soon they heard a sound; footsteps slowly circling the canoe, a steady crunch, crunch, crunch. The sound was distant but was spiraling closer towards the canoe. Crunch, crunch crunch. The footsteps circled getting closer and closer. Crunch, Crunch, Crunch. Something was searching, searching for them. Terror seized boys. They began to shake. Their shaking made a sound as they rubbed against the canoe.

Then came a soft call. "Vanderstee". It got louder "Vanderstee". Then shrieked "Vanderstee!!"

Suddenly the canoe flipped off the boys. A long scaly leg with four large talons gripped Cornelius. He tried to cling to Howard but the giant leg jerked him up and away. Fear paralyzed Howard. He could do nothing except listen to Cornelius scream as it flew away "Howard save me! Oh, save me! Dear God save Me!" He heard Cornelius call over and over; each time getting fainter until there came a final cry "Mommy mommy". Then everything became still. Howard's mind went blank.

At dawn, Howard launched the canoe and paddle towards camp. He moved by instinct, without consciousness.

Early that morning, the men set out in search of the boys. They planned to paddle north. The guides declined to join them. Henri and Baptist claimed they

needed to stay back and fix some things in the camp. They knew what had happened but said nothing. The hunters would not understand.

The sun was high above them when they spotted a lone canoe coming south. It was Howard. As they approached it, it was clear that only Howard was in the canoe. Howard only stared straight ahead and paddled with steady, powerful strokes, oblivious to the presence of the others. The men manage to grab the canoe, wrestle the paddle from Howard, and brought him back to camp. They sat him by the fire. Howard bent his knees to his chest, wrapped his arms around them, and slowly rocked back and forth. He did not speak but only moaned. All afternoon he stared northward with empty eyes. His father covered him with a blanket, sat with him through the night, and kept the fire going. The next morning Baptiste and Howard's father took him, down Greywolf Lake to catch the train back home. Howard continued to rock and moan softly until he was safely in his home. After several months of silence, he began to talk but he never spoke of that night on Raven Lake.

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The following spring, Baptiste went back to the camp on Bear Lake. He planned to collect their gear and close it up. While he was loading the canoe, he noticed something moving in the trees behind the cook shack. He crept toward the building and peered around the corner. Behind a rotting log, crouched a human figure in rags. Its hair was long and greasy and its scared face had been terribly burned. The creature was ripping into the log, hunting for grubs. It suddenly looked up, saw Baptiste, and then scampered into the bush. It was never seen again.

Henri ended his guide service and moved to Sioux Lookout where he worked in a sawmill. Later Baptiste joined him. They never returned to Greywolf. The village became desolate. The furs the people took from the forest became less valuable and life in the village was increasingly difficult. Over time the younger generation moved to the cities, Winnipeg, Thunder Bay, and even Toronto. The last of the elders moved to Thunder Bay where their children or the government would care for them. The houses have fallen and rotted away. The forest has taken over. On occasion, reports come out of the north woods. Prospectors or Hunters had ventured into the Raven Lake Country. Most are never seen again.

Howard did not return to college. He never married or held a job and rarely left the safety of his home.