

# **Of Moose and Me**

Animal Tales from an  
Alaskan Childhood

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# Introduction

I grew up in Alaska, a childhood that seemed normal to me but that still amazes many of the people I meet. Perhaps this sense of wonder occurs because so many myths have developed around Alaska and the Far North, from Native folklore to the days of Russian Alaska, and from Jack London's Gold Rush tales of dogs and men to the current fantasies appearing in film, TV, and the Internet of Alaska as the home of hardy fishermen and pilots, homesteaders and miners, and truckers and hockey moms amidst, of course, breathtaking scenery.

Growing up, I took the state's bounty for granted: complaining about the clear, cold air and water, the abundance of fresh fish and moose to eat, and all the hiking through and camping in that astounding scenery. The first complaint was not unjustified: it was truly ice-to-the-bone cold at times. The second seems foolish, particularly as the adult me considers we children's frequent whines of "Not salmon again!" while I yearn for a fresh salmon fillet for dinner. As far as the camping and hiking, even at the time I had to grudgingly admit that it was pretty wonderful, although made less romantic by the swarms of mosquitos that followed us; the fear of being nibbled by bears, whose scat on the trails offered a very material promise of possible peril; and the limited tech of our hiking and camping gear, which led to some long and uncomfortably lumpy, drafty, and very wet days and nights and allowed a surprise entrance by occasional visitors, such as the arctic ground squirrels who raced around inside our tent when we camped in Denali National Park.

The Alaska of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, the time during which my American father and British mother raised their family, was an Alaska largely undiscovered by the world, a place with very much its own identity, a rich group of diverse, eccentric people, and a multitude of animals. One of the most remarkable elements of my childhood was the chance to spend so much time with animals both wild and domestic against the backdrop of Alaska's environment, an environment increasingly endangered due to human activity, from oil and gas development and transportation to mining, and, of course, climate change. Even tourism, now the backbone of Alaska's economy, is a mixed blessing, from the cruise ships that bring money to the state while despoiling its pristine waters to the many visitors who flock to Alaska's beauties but sometimes frighten and kill wildlife, trample on native plants, and spread their litter round the state.

These stories, and the poems that accompany them, detail just a few of my family's and our friends' animal adventures in the places we lived: first the city of Anchorage in south-central Alaska; then Juneau, the state's capital, in south-east Alaska; and then back to south-central: this time to the city of Kenai, on the Kenai Peninsula, where I spent most of childhood. These tales are as true as my memory can supply, tempered somewhat by time, space, and my mother's desire that I not bend the rules of propriety (not sure I've managed that, sorry Mum!). The stories focus largely on my happy memories, while the poems explore other, sometimes darker, elements of life in Alaska and beyond while engaging with aspects of myth and history. If my work, particularly the stories, tends to focus on the sunnier elements of life, the honey with little vinegar, it's because as I get older I want to focus on those

memories, not the other, more painful, ones that I carry with me: that's the work for another collection.

## A Moose Named, Yes, Bullwinkle

Moose are gloriously endearing, walking that fine line between cute and ugly with character to spare. All moose are attractive to some degree, but baby moose are downright adorable—all long, slender legs and melting brown eyes. Sadly, many baby moose are orphaned each year due not only to predation by other animals but because of hunters and auto and train collisions. If they are found in time, orphaned moose calves are usually raised by wildlife conservation and rehabilitation organizations. When I was growing up, however, we had few or no organizations of that kind, so sometimes local officials would, with a permit, raise them: hence the triplet moose calves cared for by Dad's friend Abe, a Fish and Game officer, and the single moose calf named, unsurprisingly, Bullwinkle, who was taken in by Mark, another of my dad's friends.

I met Bullwinkle on a visit to Mark's home many years ago. When we pulled up to the house I saw what I thought was a slim brown horse in his horse corral. As we got closer I saw this was no horse but Bullwinkle, calmly watching our arrival. Bullwinkle had, I noted, a pretty sweet deal. The corral was large and the horse barn, empty since Mark sold the horses a few years back, offered a snug shelter from the wind and snow; it also had music piped in—Bullwinkle particularly enjoyed country music.

Mark let Bullwinkle out of the corral so we could meet him, and I nervously took a step back. While Abe's triplet calves were very young and not at all imposing when I met them, no larger than a good-sized Great Dane,

teenage Bullwinkle was already the size of a small horse. Mark gave me a carrot and Bullwinkle came towards me, his eyes fixed on the treat. I held it out, he stretched his neck towards me, and his velvety nose grazed my hand as his mouth opened to reveal large flat teeth. He chewed the carrot quickly, his strong teeth crunching it in seconds, and then, growing boy that he was, he came towards me for more.

Unfortunately, I didn't have any more veggies. Bullwinkle started nuzzling me, his brown muzzle moving over my face and chest, his tongue lapping at my skin. Bullwinkle then got even closer, practically knocking me down as he searched for hidden treats. Mark rescued me by distracting Bullwinkle with some quickly discovered carrots and cabbage, and I tried to put my disordered clothes in order and wipe my newly wet face: Bullwinkle certainly left an impression.

I didn't get to see Bullwinkle again, but I heard about him from my dad, who chatted with Mark about his progress. Bullwinkle stayed with Mark and his family until he was a tall young moose, just starting to sprout a prodigious rack (the antlers worn by male moose). Mark noticed that Bullwinkle began to become more and more of a wanderer, leaving for hours, even days, at a time to spend time in the woods behind the house, but always returning home for treats. Then, one day, Bullwinkle didn't come home again. Mark worried about him, particularly when hunting season came around, but he hoped for the best.

One day as Mark neared home, he saw a large moose lying in the middle of his driveway. It was a male, for as Mark drove his pickup truck closer he could see its magnificent, heavy rack. He drove towards the moose, who got to its feet but remained in the driveway. Mark drove

still closer, and the moose stood still, regarding him. Was this Bullwinkle? Mark couldn't tell. Now that the moose was standing, Mark could see the thickness of its neck and shoulders and the gleam of the sun on its glossy brown hair. The moose remained in the middle of the driveway, staring at Mark, who got out of the truck and walked towards the moose, uncertain about what to do. The moose then began to move towards him. Mark wondered if he should try to make a break for the house or get back into the truck, but he didn't have time to move as the moose came even closer, its eyes fixed on him.

Mark barely breathed as he watched the moose—a moving mountain of muscle and flesh, the largest moose he had ever seen—move towards him. He braced himself. The moose charged up to him, stopped on a dime, and then kissed Mark right on the face. It was a wet kiss—involving not only muzzle, but also a little tongue. It was indeed Bullwinkle: he had come home for a little rendezvous and treat session before heading back to the forest and, no doubt, a very busy breeding season.

# Metamorphosis

I wish I were small again with breasts  
that didn't need a bra, with feet  
that didn't need sensible shoes,  
without the weight of hips,  
of stomach, of this life itself—

to be a ferret sliding under a fence,  
or a caribou bounding over the tundra  
with my slim beautiful legs raised high,  
to be the lazy eagle at the bluff's edge  
watching for small birds in the dusty brush,  
or the bear wet with cold stream foam  
fishing delicately with huge claws  
for the zigzagging silver salmon flashes—

to be wholly animal, wholly alive,  
a dirty, tired, contented little creature  
burrowed in the warm hollow  
of my mother's arms, listening to my father  
spin out a tale as the molten gold spider  
sun slides down night's web, fading gray,  
and the owl children gossip and polish  
their beaks, their claws, and speak  
the stories only they can know.