

BIG-BOY

Robert Grunst

AS OFTEN AS not silence feeds expectation and the longing for the silence to be filled; Kenny calls again, "Big-Boy!" The sounds contain a vibrato. There is an essential nasality, a quality which carries its own acknowledgement. Still, Big-Boy does not appear.

Kenny Basina is a big man in whom you can see another. He is the regular hired man on the gillnet tug *MY BUDDY*. Meeting him one May when I arrived in Bayfield for six weeks' work aboard the same boat, I have known Basina for three years. He calls again, "Big-Boy!" His face says there is something very funny about to occur. His eyes open wider, brown eyes, with unfounded delight.

For the moment I feel helpless. I feel that funny self-consciousness which always accompanies a recognition, the possibility that someone else's attempt to enact a little flair, a little magisterial presence and command, will go unbidden by some essential but inattentive accomplice.

"Big-Boy! Come out!"

Kenny's wife works in the kitchen. Water runs in the sink. She prepares big chunks of fish for brining. She pushes her thumb along the backbones, breaking the membrane there and washing away the blood. She is a short, round woman. The glow on her face foresees an outcome. Kenny claps his hands. He laughs and Big-Boy appears.

Like a crazy spool full of frayed tan thread Big-Boy rolls from beneath the davenport. He barks and he barks. He starts up on his haunches and rocks back like some circus poster attraction and lets go live little tracers of pee. Kenny's wife laughs holding a big shiny chunk of whitefish in her hands. Her hands drip. The fish chunk is nearly as big as Big-Boy. Kenny growls a mock growl. He chortles, and he laughs some more.

"You, Big-Boy! For Christ's sake, there you go again with your stuff!"

"Big-Boy does anything he wants," Kenny's wife says from the kitchen. "You can see that," she says as if to erase any remnant of doubt. "Big-Boy owns this place. You can see that!" Kenny's wife is quite clearly proud of Big-Boy's performance.

In the woods out back of the housing site, two partridges would have little trouble picking Big-Boy up and taking him on a wild-whirl of a ride through the aspens. Big-Boy is household ambassador and saint. He is a little, short-haired clown with certain, quizzical bird dog features. Other quizzical features suggest he's the runt, the one the bitch had to lick and lick, and finally nip, to get breathing. Certain quizzical features contest, so any inquiry after a pedigree is muted. But Big-Boy speaks for himself. He opens his mouth as if he had training from the sisters of Mercy—two fingers wide—and sounds off like a big, amplified thumb, frantically and resolutely, that does the squeak-test proving a plate clean for fifty million viewers on Channel 8. Big-Boy leaps, just like you can make the spring from a ball point pen leap with your index finger, into Kenny's lap, and Kenny gleams.

"Good boy!" Kenny says. "Look at you! Now, Big-Boy, for Christ's sake? What you been doing? You been under? Sleeping and dreaming again? Dreaming of getting bred and born out by the porch? Remember that Big-Boy? You can see this Big-Boy's going to be a great one. Can't you see?" Kenny asks me.

I agree. In Kenny you can see how things have drooped around a young, strong man. You can still see power in his upper body, but it is power that gathers only after concentration. It is expensive because once collected it quickly goes, and, proportionately perhaps, with it goes a little assurance that it will ever all quite come back. Kenny has nothing direct to say about assurance and youth, though he speaks affectionately of Baby Joe, his youngest son. He tells me Joe still likes to play. Joe comes down from his room upstairs; the buildings in this project hold four units apiece, each with two levels. Joe looks at me suspiciously.

He knows I'm from out of town. He knows I show up for a few weeks and then disappear. He doesn't have to be an expert at detecting Teutonic features to see I'm no Indian, and he knows for sure not many guys like me pull off the old state highway and get invited in for coffee anywhere on the reservation.

Baby Joe is a big, strong kid with all the puffy places that show he'll be a lot bigger. There's some funny ironic twist to his expression, a little twist he seems to be fully aware of. Maybe he's suspicious that I want something, I think. And maybe he's already a little cynical about motives and people who come around and act interested. As it is, he's right. I want to hear about a certain moose.

"You know this guy, don't you, Baby Joe?" Kenny asks.

"Yah," Joe answers. He sets a little, enigmatic grin, and I wish I knew how he sees me. He sees Big-Boy, and Big-Boy sees him. Big-Boy starts up with his plate cleaning-commercial barking. Baby Joe responds with an appreciative smile. "You see how he pees like a big guy?" Joe remarks. He speaks with the admiration of a witness.

"Sure," I say. "He's like a bareback rider with no tights on."

"Oh?" Joe says. "So that's how you see it. Big-Boy's the boss around here. You ought to see that." Baby Joe continues through the room and out the door.

"Baby Joe still likes to play," Kenny says. "We're all going camping this weekend at Sand River. You might come on out and see us. We'll catch some German browns, and we'll take a deer quarter along. You ever roast deer on a stick?"

"You should see Baby Joe eat," Kenny's wife says. "And Big-Boy, you see, he'll be boss of the camp. If any bears come, he'll go hide under a cot. Big-Boy's no coward though. He just doesn't like to look at bears."

We talk about leather work, and Kenny shows me moccasins and wallets. We talk about snaring snowshoe hares again. We talk about the Oak Island hermit, Martin Cain. Kenny tells me about the locations of old apple orchards on Oak, orchards that Cain would clean out every October, and how Cain would bury the apples, insulating them with layers of rye grass straw and sand, how Cain would live on salt herring and hare and apples through the bad winters.

When Cain died in his shack on the sand point, Kenny says, Cain's three dogs went loco and would not let anyone near. A group of men had to sail all the way back to Bayfield to get rifles. When they returned, they took pot shots and the two smaller dogs ran off into the hills. Even when lead whined between its ears though, the big one wouldn't budge. Finally one man had to lower his head and let one go between its eyes.

Martin Cain is a legend around Bayfield and Kenny would talk through two pots of coffee remembering this and that plot: Martin Cain's dogs protecting the contents of his sled in the winter, the dogs in their traces hauling Cain, dead drunk in the sled, through town and down to the Booth Fishery property, then out into the ice, up the West Channel, and back to the Oak Island shack. Martin Cain comes back big; when he was a boy, Kenny saw old Cain, at least once, in his boat, a tar-black Mackinaw hull that the hermit had rigged up with some kind of one-lung gasoline engine.

When Kenny talks about that boat and Martin Cain, you can see it. You can hear the magneto, its insides chasing themselves in circles. You can hear the "bang" of the single cylinder firing away between Basswood Island and Roy's Point and the gulls going hysterical over the racket and the big wolf-dog in the bow, fixed like a figurehead, clearing its nostrils of sharp, irritating November crystals of frost.

But something is wrong about the moose. In the Martin Cain stories, Martin Cain is tough. He's a misfit and he's a survivor. He's a man with a rough face that no one looks into, and everyone knows that what's hidden behind the curls and kinks of his beard is Martin Cain's secret. It's a sure enough thing that something's askew, and everyone knows if the intimations come through with too much persuasion, someone's going to guess the

seamy line has a lot more to do with the storyteller than with the subject, Martin Cain.

The moose story is bleary. Partly, perhaps, this is due to the fact that no one will openly confess to having seen the moose. Partly too it seems, no one around Bayfield is quite sure what a moose is, or what a moose means, or the story is not old enough. Or unlike Martin Cain, the moose, if the story is true, did not die naturally; someone, then, must be guilty in the case of the death of the moose, so the story, whether it is true or not, must protect someone at least until the story is old enough; then, someone may emerge as a hero, an enigma, or the bad-butt of a joke. It is all complicated. The paradox is tangled up with the problem of trying to see something no one will confess to having seen.

"Kenny," I ask. "That moose you mentioned last week. You said someone shot a moose out here somewhere between Red Cliff and Cornucopia."

I do not remember exactly how the moose came up in the first place, though; we were on the lake, aboard the tug, and perhaps I had asked something about the old days and wildlife that used to live on the islands. Kenny is in his late fifties, or in his sixties perhaps.

"Yah. They say someone shot that moose I guess," he says. "A big moose. Probably somebody shot it. That's true." Kenny wants to concentrate, it seems, on stroking Big-Boy's neck. Big-Boy purrs. His tail swishes like a metronome. Kenny's wife has gone back to her sink and bent over her big chunks of fish. The sound that comes from the kitchen is the sound of fish swimming, swimming in some secluded place where no one can hear them.

I know in the days of Martin Cain, there were moose. The moose swam in pairs and sometimes in family groups between the islands. They swam back and forth to the mainlands. The moose were big. A mad bull or cow could keep a man treed all day, but long before Martin Cain's death, man-treing moose were already becoming old and rare stories.

If there is a moose head mounted somewhere on a wall in Bayfield, I have never seen it, though; there probably were heads that got too gnatty and had to be disposed of: unceremoniously dumped, for instance, in the big ravine. The mice and other interested gourmets would have made fast work of such a serving.

"He wasn't sure it was a moose at first," Kenny says and punctuates with a long pause. "Would you be sure? If a moose came out of the aspen, well, think of that. If you were on a deer blind, you know. See, a deer blind is a deer blind. If you shot deer there before, then it's even more of a deer blind."

"He had dressed deer right out in the clearing. It was his place. People know where you hunt your deer, and no one, you know how it is, no one sits in your place unless you make an agreement. And he offers you a quarter of the deer if he shoots it on your blind. You see? That's how we do it."

Kenny's wife is singing very sweetly over her fish. It is a tune with slow swimming in it.

"Who would expect a moose? Just think of all the trouble. No one's seen a moose around this country in years. You know that old Oscar Lund back in town? He says he shot moose for the logging outfits, but he doesn't tell it so you feel it's true. It's hard to believe in his moose. He's always sore about something. Maybe that Oscar wants somehow to keep his moose to himself. But I don't know of a man who would think like that. Because a moose is such a big thing to keep hid. It was a proud thing to take a moose once."

"What's our Big-Boy doing in there?" Kenny's wife asks from the kitchen.

"He's right here," Kenny calls back. "He purrs like a little kitty." Big-Boy fits easily in one of Kenny's hands. Big-Boy wiggles his head in between two buttons of his shirt and whines a little and listens. "You can't say just what happened. How would a moose cross all the big highways? It would almost have had to be a Boundary Waters moose. Moose don't like noise, and moose don't like people. If it was a moose maybe he thought it was just a trick of the light. You know yourself. You've seen how the islands pick up out there, and sunlight runs in between them and the water. Baby Joe saw that for the first time last year, and he didn't believe in it. He told us to take him back home. He was funny, that Baby Joe, and then Cecil says, 'Well, you better look out now. How we gonna get back home, Baby Joe, if the mainland's floated loose and there's nothing we can tie this boat back on to?' Well, that got Baby Joe worried.

"Now, maybe he put his gun down there by his tree and rubbed his eyes because a moose didn't belong there. You could say the moose or the deer that the sun monkeyed up was eating aspen buds, and it shit just then like no deer around this peninsula ever did and he got to believing it was a moose. Then he had to decide what to do about the moose-deer.

"What would you do about it? You know what it's like around here. You know when you first came, everyone wanted to know what you could do on a boat. Cecil told them. And he said you were down his basement slugging nets, and Gilmore and Duffy and Duane went down to see. So what would you do about a moose? You think anyone would believe you if you claimed you had seen a moose?

"Still, maybe he wasn't sure even after its drippings came out. And maybe he decided to take like a sounding shot to see what could happen. What would you do if you shot a deer and hit it and it starts running around in loops and bowling over half-grown trees? What would you think you had shot?"

Big-Boy wants to wiggle all the way into Kenny's shirt. Now, only his tail sticks out and works. It is a heavy, flannel shirt, and like all men's shirts, it opens to the left. Big-Boy disappears, squirms like a murmuring heart for seconds and settles in on the shelf that Kenny's stomach forms. A newcomer

might never guess that Big-Boy exists. Kenny sucks the insides of his cheeks. There is one of those shiny surfaced portraits of an Indian maid on the wall behind him, the kind of thing you see for sale in the cities along busy strips where the artist can display his work in a service station parking lot. A radiant nimbus of light sets off the head, so it seems the portrait is more about illumination than any exact lines of jaw or cheek or braids of ebony hair. Nevertheless, the representation, which reminds you of a variation on any number of portraits of the Virgin Mary, turns up often around Red Cliff. It is an idealization, so I wonder about the moose.

"Why you want to hear so much about his deer story?" Kenny's wife asks from the kitchen. "These different ones get into the woods with their drinking. They think that's the only way to do it. Next thing you know there's some nonsense thing going around from door to door like a big bunch of black flies, and every kitchen phone gets talking."

"That drinking's no good," Kenny agrees. Kenny is diabetic, and in March, while there were still big fields of ice roaming around between the islands, Kenny got stuck aboard the tug, three nights, and got pretty sick and pretty scared. Still you can see Kenny was a big, strong man in his day.

"Once this guy shot the moose," I say, "he had to kill it. If a wounded moose showed up somewhere, there would have been an investigation. The game wardens would have been all over asking questions."

Kenny slides down more into his place on the davenport. A little dreamy whine comes out of his shirt. There is a sign of reticence in the way he brings his coffee cup to his lips, and I think maybe I should forget the moose. But Kenny continues in his way, more slowly now, as if he wants to go over it for himself, and the nasal quality in his voice is more noticeable, and *t*'s turn into *d*'s more frequently, so the language gets fuzzy.

The moose is a phantom, and what the moose means is difficult to pin down. Once there were many moose, and the grandfathers and great-grandfathers knew how to hunt them. Some of them had great, massive misplaced angel-wing racks. Now, such wings are big trophies. When I ask if the moose was a bull or a cow, Kenny ignores me.

From what Kenny says, it seems it took several shots to kill the moose. Then when it was dead, the man understood there was no way he could move it. The moose was too big. The moose had come back from someplace. The man shot it. He decided the moose meant something. Or maybe he decided nothing. He had killed many deer but never a moose. He had seen moose only on T.V. The moose was too big. Unlike a deer, even a big, old, tough survivor deer, he could not drag the moose cross-country, resting in spots, to his pick-up truck.

Maybe he was even afraid to touch the moose. Too much of the story is unclear, and I think, unlike Martin Cain, perhaps Kenny never saw the moose himself. The moose would have had a certain smell, maybe like the musty smell of an old windfallen hemlock. Maybe its eyes were the color

of the shots of brandy Charlie Brown sets up at the Out-Post, the bar just a few paces outside the lines of the reservation.

You can hear Big-Boy dreaming on the warm shelf beneath Kenny's flannel shirt. Kenny is saying something about a big group of men. Once the word got out (the man who shot the moose would have needed help to butcher it and get it out of the woods) everyone would have wanted a look. The word might have gotten out of hand, and there might have been a big, half-crazy party, men who had been drinking and a woman or two little kids, and who wouldn't have understood a thing.

Someone would have brought a good ax, or at least an ax, and maybe someone thought of a saw. You have to split such an animal wide open. You have to chop away and open its breastbone. A steamy soup pours all over your boots, and inside there are all the colors, organs and fluids, twitches and spasms, surges of blood and hot things and the great-rising odors of digestion and feces, and if there are bad shots so things rupture, there is bad hemorrhaging; the smell pierces with more frankness. Few men can cut such an animal without feeling the bite in their own bodies—how tissues tear and pearl and pink and red and clot. The big arteries are vital and fearfully dead. It is like having to look into a story you would rather not see.

They would have had to chop off the head, and maybe some of them stood back and did not wish to touch the moose at all. Maybe some of them stood back and tried to figure out what the moose meant and where it had come from and if shooting the moose might have been avoided, so each one had to imagine himself as the man with the gun and had to reconstruct how it might have happened, because, after all, the man who had actually shot probably didn't make much sense when he tried to say how it had happened. And surely he had started to drink, drinks of jubilation and drinks of confirmation, drinks of apology and drinks of absolution.

They would have had to skin the moose and cut its legs off at the knees. Maybe someone still has one of the hooves for a relic. They would not have dared to bring in the head. They took the moose completely apart. Everything happened very fast. If it happened at all, there must have been lots of adrenaline because of the moose, because there is no hunting season in the state of Wisconsin for moose, because there are no moose in the wild lands of the state.

I do not believe Kenny ever saw the moose. He talks and the moose gets vaguer and vaguer. Everything is framed in qualifications, probabilities, and improbabilities and speculation. Kenny is after something. I am after something. And maybe there is some meaning, something the moose represents in the minds of those who have known of this moose from the beginning of the moose, something that must remain unsaid.

The moose does not depend on any particular point that Kenny can point to. Men and women around Red Cliff ate the moose, I guess. Kenny's wife is one of the best cooks on the reservation, and every summer at the

Raspberry Camp Ground, she directs the preparation of traditional wild game feasts. There are several kinds of fish: trout and whitefish, walleye and bass. There is deer, and there is raccoon; Kenny has told me I should come to try the muskrat and the tenderloins that come from the saddles of beaver, the sweet meats that one finds between the front and the back shoulders, saddles of muscle that shield the spine. There has never been moose at the wild game feast because, in that country, there is no moose to be seen.

Kenny names no names. He puts no specific value on the moose. I imagine now that they left the head on its pedestal of neck, and cleared out fast. At the rate which rumors can spin around Red Cliff, the tribal game wardens might have shown up any minute. The ravens would have known all about whatever it was that had been shot by then. The mice would have had intimations. The skunks would have and the porcupines would have. The coyotes would have known. So if anyone wanted to see the head, that person would have had to travel fast. The birds would peck up the suet. The offal would have gone in a sitting. There were probably battles over proprietorship. The ravens flew away with evidence. The porcupines started right in sawing on the bones. Kenny seems very careful to say nothing that might get him trapped in a judgment. He is full of mitigation and circumstance, though it is clear, if there was a moose, the moose did not survive. I would ask if the failure of the moose to survive is the problem, but everything seems too complicated now. Parts of the story have gone every which way. The virgin hanging in her frame on the wall offers a glossy fabrication of the truth; however, you can see what she means, at least.

Kenny's wife is still in the kitchen. Now, she is fixing up a goulash. Any goulash is better if it has a chance to sit overnight, she says. I've heard this before. It seems to be a settled point. I can still smell tomato sauce. I have seen packages of macaroni and packages that contain ground deer. Everyone says Kenny's wife is a marvelous cook. Beaver saddle strikes me as incongruous, I guess, because I have never seen it. I can't get over the association with horse. We have drunk a lot of coffee, and Kenny is steering things back toward Martin Cain, a man whom you must recognize is all wrapped up with Kenny's youth. You can see Kenny was a big, strong man in his prime. Martin Cain was a man, and he was a survivor. Kenny had seen that. Kenny has been over and over points involving Martin Cain.

I can hear the goulash starting to steep and bubble on Kenny's wife's stove. The stove's enamel is very bright. Kenny's wife wears an apron which is splotted full of color. Big-Boy is dreaming, and Kenny knows you have to see him to understand the paradox in his name. It's the same thing with Baby Joe. Anyone in Bayfield can understand it. Everyone in Bayfield understands the hitch in the hermit's last name. The goulash bubbles and bubbles. Both Kenny and I have to be up early in the morning. There's a gang of chub nets due to be lifted, a gang set right out between the steamboat lanes. This time of the year the fog can be as thick as what's cooking, and the coal boats

and the grain boats and the foreign flag freighters hoot and trumpet—great big hulls you'd better believe in. If one gets too close, if it sees you too late, it could cut you in half. If it happens, there's no time to put things right.

Big-Boy goes on sleeping on his warm, comfortable shelf. Big-Boy is in a safe place. He's a little joker even in sleep. When he comes to again, he'll size up the room and then go to work on his act. Kenny will laugh, and Kenny's wife will laugh. Big-Boy will size things up to see if there should be an encore or not. Big-Boy will get his share of the goulash, and the goulash will be good. Kenny's wife sees to it. She knows the exact ingredients she needs to put together a good recipe. She is a famous cook. Over her shoulder she says something about a tribal meeting next week, a debate over ancestors, and how to stage some old ancestral dance.