

MOLEMAN

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Standing in the meadow, he strokes the smooth pelts of the moles he has caught; their limp bodies are small and vulnerable in his large bony hands.

He loves moles, always has; and he kills moles, always had. He examines the largest and shiniest pelt. "You're a fine one," he smiles, fingering the short, satinlike fur. "A few more of your size and she'll have her coat."

For three seasons he has saved the best pelts for the coat he is piecing together for Anneke. When finished, he will wrap it in newspaper, tie a string around it and take the parcel along as he boards the bus to Oakville, Ontario. He will walk the quiet lanes down to the lake, to the two-storey house where he left her, forty two years ago. He will ring the doorbell, and stand on the doorstep, waiting for her to open the door. He will hand her the parcel, without a word, take a good look at her, turn around and leave.

Anneke had never accepted mole trapping as a way to make a living for a man. Back home, in the clouded North Sea country, he used to take his sack and bicycle every morning, and leave before dawn for the freedom of the Friesian pasture lands, windblown, seemingly unsheltered by the dikes. But Anneke had insisted: "Let's go some place where a man can earn a living without having to skin moles." She never understood he was a mole trapper by choice.

After they married, they left the Netherlands and sailed for Canada.

He tried farmwork and odd jobs in Ontario like thousands of other newcomers. But he never brought home enough money to provide them with that little surplus needed to build a future; later, his efforts turned out to have been wasted when Anneke, running out of patience, left him for a truck-driver. A man with a steady job, to her, represented security, and security she needed to start the family she wanted so badly.

"Might as well go trapping again," he had thought. But moleskin was not in demand in this country with its many valuable furbearing animals; so he went to the North country to make a living, trapping beaver and muskrat.

He went to North Bay, bought beavertraps, a canoe and supplies and settled at Lake Talon, where he built a cabin on a small tongue of land in the lake.

In those days, while still young, he thought he could make himself at home anywhere.

In the watery wilderness of the Canadian Shield, the years slipped by unnoticed, while

he trapped countless beavers and muskrats. Hardly ever did he think of Anneke; he didn't think much of anything, other than matters of daily living. Over the years the animals he pursued gradually declined: beaver were becoming rare, and muskrats were less profitable. After thirty-eight years of trapping at the lake, it dawned on him that the world was changing. His annual harvest had dwindled to a mere trickle of pelts, while fur prices went through the floor. But money did not worry him; he had learned to live off the land, and his annual purchases of staples had come down to the bare minimum of grain, salt, sugar, canned cooking oil, some odds and ends of hardware and occasionally some sewing thread. He had no debts, and no obligations to anyone.

Yet there was something on his mind.

As he sat in his cabin during the long winter nights, repairing clothes, snowshoes, traps, fishing and boating gear, old memories began to stir: faded pictures, stored in dormant corners of his mind, resumed color, became vivid views of windblown shores and the low silt land of his youth; sometimes he thought he could smell the salty wind, hear the mooing of cattle, melancholy in the evening, and see the distant shapes of sheep grazing on the dikes. Suddenly he felt restless in this landlocked country, surrounded and threatened by black armies of spindly spruce. He felt a sudden, urgent need to see distant, clean horizons, without trees.

One balmy spring morning he loaded the patched up canoe; he took the slim pile of pelts he had collected, a bundle of clothes, and a string of tiny moletraps, carefully preserved in oilcloth.

As he pushed clear of the pebbled beach, he left the cabin, and the stacks of beaver traps and other gear, to whom it would concern.

In the town of Mattawa he traded his pelts, receiving barely enough money to pay for his train ticket to Moncton, New Brunswick, near the Atlantic coast. Arriving on a drizzly morning he took the bus down the Petitcodiac River, and out to the bay, where the bus left him.

Breathing deeply, he stood on a coastal outcrop, windblown like the North Sea dikes and sand dunes of his youth.

A following bus took him down the coast; he scanned the countryside through the rain-splashed windows, looking for a place to stay. Near the marshes of New Horton he spotted an abandoned farmhouse and asked the driver to stop. He

took his traps and the sack with his clothes, and walked down to the house which had been boarded up at one time; now the plywood had come down and the glassless windows were waiting for the winter storms, without defense.

He moved in and fixed up the kitchen and part of the roof.

The locals watched him a while, then decided he was a harmless eccentric and left him alone. The children followed him around, initially, as he went about the fields with his sack and shovel; but the silent stare from the pale blue eyes in his unsmiling face discouraged, even scared them.

His trapping grounds were up on the hill, coarse pasture land riddled with mole runs; on certain days, when the fog came in from the marshes, he could smell the sea.

He bought a used bicycle, and biked up the hill, twice a day, to check on the traps. On Sundays he stayed home, or journeyed into the coastal swamps, to watch the birds breeding in spring, flocking in the fall; he remembered seeing such birds in the polders back home.

Moleskin didn't sell in the village, he soon found out, and he ended up turning the tiny pelts into floor mats and blankets for his own use. One day he managed to fashion a sleeveless vest together, and he decided to make another and try to sell that; he didn't like to play the vendor part, but he needed the cash, and soon he found himself making vests and later jackets, on order. With each piece of clothing he made, he learned a little about tailoring, and slowly the project which now so absorbed him took shape in his mind.

One day he decided he had made his last jacket and was now ready to create a masterpiece; he would make a fur coat, a long, glorious coat of silken moleskin, that was to be his gift to Anneke.

Several years went by. Only the best and largest moleskins found their way into Anneke's coat. The surplus skins went into floormats and blankets, which made the kitchen warm and comfortable, even in winter.

He had few other needs.

He turned an old pram frame into a two-wheel trailer, and hitched it to his bike twice a year, to go shopping and to cash the Supplement checks for which he had become eligible. After cashing his checks he rode to the general store to stock up on salt, sugar, oil, milk powder, flour and, guiltily, a few cans of tobacco.

The kitchen garden provided the other ingredients for his meals; greens in the summer, root vegetables and beans for the winter.

He likes to have the same daily routine, except on Sundays. Each morning he goes to

collect the catch of last night; moles take little time to sleep; restlessly tunnelling through the dirt, munching insects, grubs and worms as they go, a mole seems ready to push its head into a trap any time, day or night. Gently he takes them out, brushes off the dust to reveal the shine of the velvety coats, then packs them carefully into the burlap sack; five of them this morning. Down at the road, he pauses, and looks up at the molefields. The morning haze is lifting and he remembers the hundreds of miniature hills, some freshly thrown up and still steaming, casting their shadows on the grass, early in the morning in the mole fields back home; over here, moles are different, and not given to the construction of mounds. The fields lie seemingly untouched, hiding the secret massacres which take place below the surface; these are strange moles at any rate, only faintly resembling those he knew back home. The limp bodies in the burlap bag sport pink fleshy whiskers, like spuds growing from a potato. Only the skins looked the same.

He sits on the bench near the toolshed, scraping blood and flesh from another prime pelt, for Anneke, and ignoring the stares from the cats at his feet, hoping for scraps. He wishes she could have seen the molefields this morning, glowing in the hazy light; she never understood about moles and moletrapping, but the coat is destined to change that. Surely a creation that beautiful will cause her to change her mind, to regard mole trapping as a worthwhile occupation at last!

How good it is to be back at it; and how good it is to be back near the sea. It has been four years since the bus dropped him off, one drizzly afternoon. Every day of those years, shaped by the wind, the clouds, the birds, and the rippling grass of the molefields, he has lived to remember, while thirty-eight years in the wooded boglands of northern Ontario merged to a quickly passing dream. Sometimes he wonders what kept him so long.

Nearly three hundred moles lost their lives, and their skins, to Anneke's coat. Now, after he puts in the last stitch, he pegs it to the wall and admires its dark lustre. From the kitchen drawer he retrieves a postcard and stamp, bought in the village last spring; returning to the table, he sharpens a pencil with his pocket knife and sits down to write.

"Lieve Anneke, I hope you and your family are in good health. Is your husband still in trucking? I have something for you; I would like to hand it over myself. In two weeks from now, if that's OK with you?"

He doesn't bother to sign, trusting that his handwriting and the use of their native language

will be sufficient identification.

The next morning he waits at the road for the mailman, who comes down the hill in his van, and stops abruptly, in a cloud of dust – no mailman has had any business at this point of the road for decades.

After handing over his letter to Anneke, the moleman walks home and sits down in the kitchen. Nothing left to do, except wait.

He studies the floor, the walls and the bed, the moleskin floor mats, wall hangings and blankets. They will last for the rest of his life; he cannot justify killing more moles, now that the coat is finished, and he decides to stay home the following days, cleaning traps and putting them away – the cats will have to live on milk from now on, or catch their own meat. He busies himself around the house and cannot relax, waiting for word from Anneke.

On the sixth day he is out in the rain, feeding the cats, when the van turns into the muddy driveway and comes up to the door. Ignoring the rusty box by the roadside, the mailman has decided to have a better look at the old man and his quarters.

“Return mail”, he says cheerfully, as he gets out, waving an envelope. “Nice day eh?”

The moleman takes the envelope without a word and is walking toward the toolshed. The mailman shrugs, returns to the van and drives off. “Old Sourpuss”.

The moleman stares at the envelope, pure white when he last saw it, now dogeared and soiled, criss-crossed by inkstamps. “Undeliverable” it reads, in big black lettering, and in handwriting: “Moved, address unknown.”

In the afternoon, the moleman pushes uphill with his bike and trailer. At the bottom of the field he begins raking up loose soil from the mole runs, loading it onto the trailer. He eases the heavy load down the road and into the yard, dumping the dirt between the house and the toolshed. Pulling out thistles and crabgrass, he digs a shallow trench in the soil. In it he arranges the soft, luxurious coat in gentle folds, fitting it into the hollow with great care, returning the skins to the soil and covering them with the dirt they came from.

He heaps the soil up to a pile, a conical mound, in old world mole fashion, then steps back to judge the result. A truly monumental mole mound, surely the only one of its kind on this side of the Atlantic Ocean.

Afienna Kamminga

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