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Father Elk

Davie rode in the back seat. He was bored with the drive down the mountain, their weekly journey to Denver for groceries and other errands. They slowed and stopped. His mother opened the back door and unbuckled Davie. She said, "Come on." He slid across the back seat, and she helped him out of the car onto the shoulder of the highway.

Cameras aimed at sixty elk on the meadow above the highway. Some of the elk grazed, stepping slowly forward as they cropped the lush wild grass. Some of the elk lay down in the grass and chewed their cud.

Above the herd at the edge of the forest of ponderosa pine, Engleman spruce, quaking aspen, Douglas fir, brush and grass, two father elk stand high on the meadow, toward 14,000 foot peaks. Wide-spread, majestic antlers reach toward blue sky.

Davie stands and watches the elk. Especially, he watches the father elk. They graze for a minute or so at a time, but mostly they look down the hill at the activity along the highway. Smells of mountain meadow, grasses and flowers and of the forest blow across his face in the slow breeze. He smells the elk, their lives, their motions.

Now he knows the answer to the question his grandfather asked, "What are you going to be when you grow up, Davie?" An elk, a father elk, a huge animal standing above the reclining herd. He asks the father elk, and they tell him, "There is still much for you to learn." Then he will learn. He will practice. He will learn how to grow into a father elk.

More than the rest of the herd, the father elk are nervous because of the activity along the highway. Though they are the length of the meadow from each other, they turn as one and walk into the forest, behind trees and brush. Their motion, huge animals moving quietly as the soft breeze across the meadow, is something that Davie knows he must learn before he is ready, motion as easy as thought. Thought as motion.

His father says it is time to go, but Davie doesn't move. His father picks him up and puts him into the car and fastens him in place, and they drive away down the highway.

Davie will not play with his friends anymore if they will not play father elk with him. Silly games he used to play are only silly games. His friends want to play games from what they see on television, and Davie is no longer interested in those games. He is no longer interested in television.

His friends are puzzled by the change in him. Most of them will not attempt to play the new game that Davie has, "We are elk." His mother, and his sister, Sarah, attempt to play this game with him.

His mother knows there is something deeper here than any of the other people around them realize. Her task is similar to attempting to understand a complex discipline, Hatha Yoga, for example, without verbal explanation, because Davie has little verbal understanding of what it is he is trying to do. It is preverbal and sensible to him because verbal understanding is something he has recently enough acquired that he remembers there was something broad and deep before he acquired it.

There is little activity to the game, just standing, moving slowly, attempting to be. There is some pressure from other children. "You want to be ga-ga-goofy, just like Davie, ga-ga-goofy, ga-ga-goofy."

The slowness of the game and the pressure from other children combine, and Sarah gives up her attempts to understand and to go with him. She tries to get him to play something else. Then she rejoins the other children. She is confused, because she doesn't want to abandon her brother, but she can't abandon being one of the children. She tries to get the children to stop making fun of Davie, and they usually don't do it when she's around, but some of them continue with it when she isn't there.

Davie has gone some place in his mind that none of the children around him can reach. It has no effect, to make fun of him. He seems not to even hear them. After a while, they stop ridiculing him. Soon, even when there are other children around him, Davie is alone.

He is determined to learn, but he has little to go on. The adults around him think Davie is playing. When he asks them questions, they know very little or they attempt to answer him in terms of make-believe, failing to see that he has moved beyond make-believe. He speaks of when the father elk spoke to him, but the adults around him don't understand. They still think he is making believe. When he says he isn't making

believe, the adults think what he is saying is part of making believe. He stops trying to explain.

His mother helps him find books about elk. His reading abilities improve rapidly, but there is little in the text of the books that says anything about actually being elk. The pictures fascinate him, but they don't mean anything about being elk.

His mother wants to help him learn, but she worries. She speaks to his father. "Games of imagination are fine, but I wonder when they start to go too far. Sometimes I think we're losing Davie to his imagination."

"Look at the other kids. What do they play?"

"I don't know. I don't see that much of them anymore. When I do see them, it seems like they mostly play what they see on television. Fight, kick, shoot, kill."

Davie's father put his cup down on the table. "Let him do what he's doing."

Deep in his own existence, Davie has a sense of a majestic state of existence, calmness, blending with the world around him. He reaches into that state of being, exploring it, trying to exist there. It is little to go on, without instruction, without further opportunities to see what he is attempting to be. He is not bothered by what he lacks or the distractions around him but continues to attempt to be what he will become without fully understanding what he will become.

Davie's father and his grandfather go up the mountains in the fall of the year. They camp up there where snow already has fallen and stays on the ground and begins to build some depth. They stay more than a week.

When they come back from the mountain, they have two bull elk dead in the back of the pickup. In their pride of achievement, they have left the carcasses as whole as they could and get them loaded. The skins are still connected to the heads, the form of the animals crudely represented by what is left of them after death.

When they pull the tarp back and begin to unload the cut-apart bodies, Davie does not at first comprehend what he sees. His eyes see it, but his brain, his person rejects it again and again.

He cannot avoid comprehension. It does reach into him. He opens his mouth, but no sound emerges.

His grandfather sees him standing in emotion and mistakes it for admiration for their hunting ability. He touches the antlers

of the six point, dead, father elk and tells Davie, "I killed this one." He bends down and picks Davie up so he can see better.

Davie strikes him with his fist. His grandfather says, "Hey Davie, be careful there," and grabs his fist. Davie tries to strike with his other fist, but his grandfather blocks it. Davie kicks, and his grandfather puts him down. "Davie, what are you doing?"

His father says, "Davie, what are you doing?" and Davie turns and kicks him. The two men restrain him. He is unable to move, unable to do anything at all against the men or to save himself.

When he is still, no longer struggling, his father takes him into the house. Davie is crying. He isn't aware that he is crying. His father leaves him with his mother. "I don't know what's wrong with him. He won't say."

He goes back outside, and they hang the dismembered carcasses in the garage to season.

His mother tries to comfort him. She tries to find out why he is crying. He won't say anything. After a while, he stops crying. To his mother, he looks exhausted. He breathes hard, then falls to the floor. His mother takes him to his room and helps him get into bed.

Davie hasn't seen the hanging pieces of bodies, but he sees them in his mind as clearly as if he is looking at them. He does not sleep for a long time. He makes no sound. He breathes hard.

Then he sleeps. When he sleeps, he dreams of the herd of elk they saw on the meadow between Fairplay and Denver when the father elk stood at the edge of the forest above the rest of the herd, and then turned and walked into the forest and blended with the wild world around them.

Davie dreams of dismembered bodies hanging from hooks in the garage. He wakes in the dark night and sees the images in the darkness of the room. He makes no sound.

Then the room around him is gone. He stands on the mountain again, by himself this time. The last sunshine of the day slants across the mountain meadow above him that rises up the mountain. He smells the liquid green of life on the mountain, fading toward winter. He walks slowly, by himself, along the bottom edge of the meadow. He doesn't know where he is from the world of the highway, and that doesn't matter.

The father elk stands alone on the meadow, above where

Davie walks. The elk walks, then begins a stately trot into the forest above the meadow toward the top of the mountain, where the snow lies deep and white, until there is nothing to see of him on the meadow, only bent leaves of grass starting to straighten toward blue sky again, toward hard blue mountain sky.

Davie is quiet in the late day and walks up the meadow, toward white snow on the higher mountain. He is quiet inside and in his movement. The day moves toward night, toward darkness. He moves faster, a slow trot up the meadow relaxed and graceful in his movement.