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## THE RACCOONS

by

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One

I recall that they came on a warm summer's afternoon.

It was quite a shock, of course, seeing a hundred man-sized raccoons marching out of the forest, walking on two legs, chanting a raccoon's chant and holding up protest signs for raccoon rights.

They were well spoken, and quite elegant, as far as raccoons go. Their population had been increasing at an unsustainable rate for some time now, and the forest no longer suited their needs. When our mayor spoke with them and asked them about what they wanted, they rubbed their paws on their furry heads, deep in thought. It had been quite a feat to gather their population

and march on the town in the first place, they explained. They would need more time to think on what exactly they wanted.

At work the next day, I was talking to my boss. The subject of the raccoons inevitably came up. We talked at length about what their demands would be. How it would change our lives.

They couldn't, we thought. After all, they were just raccoons, and we were people. People who walked on two legs and could think their own thoughts and do their own things. We left it at that, and as I walked out of his office and he shut the door in my face I remembered that I wanted to ask him for a raise.

## Two

Within a week, the raccoons made their move. It was bound to happen, of course. Raccoons are hardworking animals, and once they set their minds to something, they're going to achieve it one way or another.

The forest grew smaller and smaller as they cleared the land and built their houses and farms. By the following week, it was completely gone.

"We need more land," the grandchild of their leader (who was now their leader) said at a meeting. "Why not the gardens?"

The mayor shook his head. That place meant too much to too many, he explained. That was too much to give up.

"How about the park?" the raccoon offered. No one of significance really used it any more.

The mayor agreed.

### Three

I was on a walk with my wife when the first bulldozers came to clear the park. An old man there had not gotten the memo, and the bulldozers came as he was eating an afternoon supper.

He raised his fists at them. “Why here? Why now?” he asked them. They didn’t have an answer for him. By nightfall the authorities had removed him, and two days later, the construction of a brand-new raccoon suburb was completed.

I remember the first time I walked through the raccoon suburb. They had built their dwellings in our image - these houses were fit for both human and raccoon consumption. 30 of them could fit into one house, and each room had enough space to be inhabited by a single family.

I couldn’t help but notice a certain energy of accomplishment that surrounded each individual raccoon as I passed by them. They strutted higher, their backs no longer arched, almost as if to say ‘look, here’s what I accomplished, here’s how far I’ve come, here’s who I am now.’ Some even wore human clothes (fitted for raccoons, of course), and they patted them proudly, showing off to the human onlookers.

I met the raccoon mayor as he was giving a speech that day. He spoke like any head of state would, with metaphors and analogies and fancy figures of speech that all amounted to, at the end of a thorough literary analysis, nothing of substance.

At the end of the speech, he bowed, and we all clapped.

There was a dinner party after. I had a chance to meet with the raccoon mayor during a bout of downtime.

“There’s space here, for all kin and folk,” he drunkenly said to me. “And work to be done.”

I shook my head. I was happy where I was, I told him. No need to move.

He sighed sadly. I had impressed him, somehow, and it would be a shame to not have my presence in the neighborhood. They drank and relaxed all day, he let slip casually, as if that would change my mind. But I declined the dedicated raccoon a second time.

“I wish you could see our ways,” he said to me. “We are not evil creatures. We simply want to exist.”

I told him I saw no malicious intent in their actions.

He smiled. “At least you understand,” he said. “For us raccoons, that’s more than enough.”

And with that, he walked away, his wine sloshing dangerously close to the edges of his glass.

#### Four

Everyone knows how the raccoon sense of time is different from ours. It’s faster. For example, by the time our mayor moved away, 80 generations of raccoon mayors had been born and buried. That’s what happens when you have children by the dozens, and your lifespan only lasts into the months. However, for some reason, we never really took that into consideration when we welcomed the raccoons in.

By the next month, there were several thousand raccoons living in their allocated spaces. They had even gone to the trouble of asking the neighboring town for help, so as to not bother us. Even when we would have turned to desperation and other more pointed means to aid in our

survival, they crammed themselves into their closets and bathrooms and told the news cameras that there was no trouble, no need to intervene. They would handle it themselves.

Intentional or not, over the time they had spent in our town, they had won our hearts and affection. They were still raccoons, after all, and their big black eyes and overall cute demeanor had guilted some of the more soft-hearted folk in the town.

It started with our neighbors, who lent their house to a hundred raccoons. The neighbors slept in their car for a full week before the raccoons took pity on them and built them a smaller house to live in alongside their former one.

Soon, entire human suburbs had willingly given themselves up to the raccoons. Their former denizens either worked with the raccoons, who gladly built them human-sized lodgings, or simply moved away, having given up.

With humans going, more resources could be allocated to the remaining citizens of the town. Our standard of living had been maintained, and in some aspects, even improved - raccoons, being pedestrians, as well as not having advanced to the industrial era, stuck to the sidewalks, and so for the first time in years, I could commute on time for work.

But the population kept dwindling. People kept moving away. The company changed offices, and I was left unemployed, not that human currency had much sway in this area any more. Soon, it was just the two of us - me and my wife - that held on.

#### Five

Imagine, if you will, another nation peacefully merging with yours. Or perhaps aliens landing and claiming a certain part of territory theirs. They are not bad people. They haven't killed a single one of your folk, or overstepped any of your boundaries. But their population grows. No longer exists as a minority. The street signs change. The cashier talks to you in the

foreign language first. Road laws change - all miniscule stuff. But it adds up. A cultural war that your people have lost, and the other side's gleefully rubbing it in your face.

But it isn't gleeful, you tell yourself. It's the natural law. Time moves forward, and so do customs, and so do people. So why do you feel like this? Is it because of jealousy? Or is it because being forgotten is a very painful feeling?

That's why they moved away. They wanted to make their mark somewhere else. Stand out in some other part of the world, not be one of the masses. That's why they moved here, to this small town, in the first place. Pioneers, they thought themselves of. Not an afternote.

### Six

She could take it until the first snowfall. I think it was the sea of paw prints that reminded her of reality. Or perhaps it was that she hadn't physically spoken to a single human being other than me for half a year now.

"I have to go now," my wife of some 30 years said simply, grasping her bags firmly by her side.

"You don't have to. Not here. Not now," I said.

"I'll remember you," she said, those being the last three words she ever spoke to me.

And then she left, leaving me just the photographs, the records, and the car.

### Seven

"They told me of your arrival," the new raccoon mayor spoke to me in front of my freshly-built treehouse dwelling.

"It looks nice," I mentioned.

"We had it built specifically for you," he said. "Our history books tell of you. You'll be remembered as the last one who crossed over."

The work was simple, yet engaging. I had the honor of cutting down the last tree in the vicinity, and planting the first crop.

The population kept growing. The raccoons started work on a grand metropolis in a plot that was designated as their town center.

I came to visit when the snow melted and the roads cleared.

“We have come far!” the mayor’s child (now the mayor) gleefully said to me. “Look - is this discernible from your own cities? Before, we were just simple animals of the land. But we’ve progressed. Do you agree?”

I did. He explained to me that I had aided them for so much and so long that they’d be constructing a statue of me right in the center.

The mayor patted me on the hip. “You stuck with us. For us, that is more than enough.”

I made some joke about raccoons being easy to please.

The mayor nodded. “An individual raccoon, yes, very excitable, very easy. But our culture? Through generations?” He shook his head aggressively. “You have done us a great service. Let us do you one, in return.”

Eight

After my shift, I passed by the statue, still under construction. They had gotten my likeness down to the wrinkles. It was almost impressive, but since they were raccoons, it was actually impressive.

It was made out of solid bronze. The artist, who I met by the construction site, was a talented one, and you could discern the depths of gratitude these creatures had towards this one person through the pose of the statue alone. She explained that the statue would start to rust in a

hundred years, and by the turn of the millennium, without maintenance, only then would its limbs start to crack and come off.

“We’ll finish it tonight,” she explained. “That will hopefully be a gift enough to you, who has helped us so much. The last one to come, and the last one to go”

Then, she paused, and thought for a moment.

“I’m not sure if I should tell you this,” she started.

“Tell me what?” My interest was piqued.

She took a few seconds more to contemplate.

“The population’s growing. Too much, too fast,” she said. “We’re leaving tomorrow.” I was shocked. “To where?” I asked.

“The government has sold us an entire state. We’re packing up our belongings and all moving there.”

I stood still for a moment. “That’s too quick,” I protested. “You must plan for such a big action.”

“We have,” she said. “We have thought about this for two whole weeks.”

I nodded. “What will you plan to do there?”

She shrugged. “Things that we do here. Actions we’ve always undertaken. It will be fun. You should see us on the television. We look very cute on the television.”

“I should hope so,” I said. “And then?”

She laughed. “Then we will do more things. And we will keep on doing things until, I hope, we don’t feel the need to do them any more.”

“And then?”

“Then,” she said, leaning in in a dramatic manner, “then we’ll do some other things.”



Nine

In the morning, it was warm enough to wear a shirt, and the mayor had left me a parting gift.

It was a collection of photos that we had taken together. My favorite alcoholic beverage. An apple, the first and only of the year's harvest.

I took the morning to drive the streets by myself.

I drove for hours.

The scale was hard to interpret with all of the creatures running around, but now that they had gone, you could really see it - it wasn't just a city, it was an entire kingdom.

The buildings stretched to the distant mountains, and went up and down them, past where the eye could see them.

I reached the boundary of the town, and kept going.

The raccoons had developed the lands of the closest towns, and the towns after that. Still, the skyscrapers went on.

I reached the base of the mountains. I kept going.

Networks of tunnels, caverns emptied out, filled with huts and raccoon lodging.

I reached the peak of the mountain. Still, the city stretched, its limits nowhere in sight.

I looked back, and I could barely see my house on the horizon. The chimney coughed smoke upwards, a memory of a colder past that I had forgotten about. The empty buildings, a similar memory.

I looked onward, onto the next mountain range, to the lands I had never dared venture to for my entire life, to sights and sounds and experiences I had never dreamed of even remotely encountering.

I checked my gas. Enough.

I keep going.

THE END

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