



COCO

MOOSE RULE #1: Don't lose your head.

Usually “don't lose your head” means don't lose control or get too emotional about something. But here, at Wonderland Amusement Park, it literally means: “Don't lose your head!”

It's all fun and games until you're wearing the Morty the Moose costume and a mob of sugar-fueled kids is about to rush you.

I'd grown up with the Moose Rules. Not only at the amusement park, but at home. Wonderland has been our family business for three generations.

I thought I'd be assigned a cushy job for my first-ever shift. I mean, I was the boss's kid. I couldn't run the rides; you had to be sixteen for those. I'm fourteen. But I was

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thinking front gate, souvenir shack, slushie stand—or best-case scenario: an air-conditioned job at the prize counter or candy store inside the arcade.

Then I was hit with a bombshell.

“Coco Cooper!” The assistant manager, Jack, had greeted me and checked his clipboard. “Today you’ll be . . . the face of Wonderland.”

The face of Wonderland . . . wait. He didn’t mean . . .

“You’re Morty!” he announced.

Oh. No. *That* face of Wonderland.

In the pecking order of jobs, costume was rock-bottom, along with cleanup crew, who handled the dreaded Code Chuckles (walkie-talkie code for when someone had vomited).

“Yay!” Inwardly screaming, but outwardly smiling, I’d headed down to the costume closet. I opened the door and immediately gagged at the stank of decades of other bodies baked into the fabric. I knew how infrequently this monstrosity was cleaned.

I’d taken the heavy, fuzzy dark brown moose body off its hook and laid it on the ground. I’d stepped into the leg holes, pulled the costume up and over my arms, and fastened the Velcro on the back. Itchy is not my favorite feeling. Fuzzy hoof feet covers over my sneakers, fuzzy hoof mittens over my fresh manicure (sigh).

I’d gotten up early this morning to copy my favorite

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makeup tutorial and coax my frizzy brown hair into submission for nothing (bigger sigh). I took the giant, heavy moose head with the antlers off its stand and maneuvered it on. It was suffocating. Fun fact: Morty's eyes are painted on, unseeing. There's a mesh screen where Morty's mouth would be—my only source of fresh air and vision. Good thing I wasn't claustrophobic! Just kidding, I was.

I checked myself in the full-length mirror.

Well, hello, Morty, I thought. And goodbye, dignity.

I stepped outside the costume closet and began my new role. My hooves thudded down the hallway. *Here we go!*

The Moose was loose!

The moose is considered the “unicorn” of the Adirondacks. Some people think New York is all a big city, but I live in a small upstate town surrounded by mountains, forests, and lakes. Hundreds of moose roam around the wilderness, but they're rarely seen by people.

Park legend is that a Morty the Moose sighting is also magical. When I was little, I believed so fiercely in the “magic of Morty.”

Now it was up to me to be that magic.

The park was about to open for the day. From beyond the front entrance, I could hear children start screaming, “Morty! Morty!” I had a blurry, horror-movie view of kids clawing at the gates. My heart pounded at the thought of the impending kid-pocalypse.

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Magic show? Try horror show.

I turned around to hide behind the nearest building, but *BAM!* Right, antlers. I wasn't the epitome of coordination even in normal clothes. I smacked into Cotton Candy Corner and knocked my moose face askew.

Darkness descended, both inside my moose head and in my soul. I'd witnessed countless Mortys maneuvering the costume, even doing the Macarena, the Cupid Shuffle, the Cha-Cha Slide! What was I doing wrong?

And then a voice boomed over the loudspeakers. My dad's voice.

"It's a *wonderful* day at Wonderland A-MOOSE-ment Park!"

Cheesy, but a well-timed reminder. Wonderland was my family business, in my blood. I'd been waiting for this day forever. I was determined to prove myself. I was going to be the best, the Employee of the Week—our "MVP" (Moose-t Valuable Player)—if it killed me.

Which I now realized, it actually might.

"And the park is NOW OPEN!"

"MORTY!" A mob of tiny humans flooded through the gates, arms outstretched like a mini zombie uprising headed my way.

Moose up!

One of my dad's moose-isms popped into my head. It meant to tackle the problem, face the fear. Do the thing.

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I groped for my antlers and with a giant heave, shoved my head back into position. Victory! Mouth-eye in place! Summoning all my inner strength, I opened my arms and welcomed the zombies toward me—with a hunger not for brains, but for hugs.

“Morty! I love you, Morty!”

Aw. My cold moose heart melted. So this was how it felt to be a literal icon. I held out my moose arms to wrap the children in warm, comforting hugs.

“AHHH!” The piercing scream of a toddler made me flinch. *Yikes*. Their dad pulled the crying child away. *Next?* A little girl stepped up to the plate and threw her arms around me. Alrighty, back on track. I hugged and posed and waved. Lather, rinse, repeat.

“Morty! We need a picture!” parental paparazzi begged. All part of a celebrity’s life, though, right? I couldn’t say I wasn’t enjoying this attention, all eyes on me.

A mom pushed her fun-size twin to the front of the crowd and held up her phone to capture the moment. “Say cheese!”

I put one fuzzy arm around the girl and posed.

“Ew.” The little girl recoiled. “You thmell groth.”

She wasn’t wrong. A whiff of myself hit me in the snout. Oof. It was like I’d been strolling through a bowl of sweat soup. The girl fled. I couldn’t blame her. *Next*.

Suddenly I felt hands climbing my moose body.

DEFCON 1! Danger, danger!

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I looked down and came eye to mouth-eye with a small but agile boy. His eyes narrowed, his nostrils flared, and he shoved his hand under my costume head and grabbed my neck.

“I knew it!” he proclaimed. “You’re a fake! I’m gonna take your head off!”

People stopped in their tracks. I felt all their eyes staring at me. Oh no. Oh no, no, no, no. You don’t tamper with Santa’s beard. You don’t unveil the Easter Bunny.

And you don’t mess with Morty’s head.

Rule #1: Don’t lose your head! I gripped as if my life depended on it.

This kid was strong. I needed an assist. However, there also was—

Rule #2: Mute the Moose.

To hold up the Morty mystique, we weren’t allowed to talk or reveal a human inside. I had to resort to something I’d prayed I’d never have to do in public: the moose call. It was the only sound Morty was allowed to make, usually reserved for urgent situations. A cry for help.

“Ah-woo!” I called out, quietly at first. No response. So I bellowed, deep and mournful. “Ah-WOO! AH-WOOOOO!”

“Did Morty just fart?” I heard a kid say.

“I’m coming, Morty!” someone yelled.

Oh no. I knew that voice all too well. The person coming to my rescue was the one person I *didn’t* want to see me

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struggle. The one person who didn't think I could handle this job in the first place.

My sister, Quinn.

"Hey!" Quinn said to the boy currently attempting a costume breach. Her voice was full of confidence, the voice that not only led the varsity volleyball team to the state semifinals but also got me to hurry up in the bathroom at home. "Want some free tokens?"

It worked. The boy let go of my throat and held out his hands.

"Go play arcade games," Quinn commanded, and the kid took the tokens and ran off. She turned to me and hit me with an unexpectedly sultry greeting.

"Hiiiiii," she cooed, and hip-bumped me. "Is it *steamy* in there?"

"Quinn!" I yelled at her, tossing Rule #2 completely out the window. "Gross! It's ME!"

"Coco?" my sister squeaked. "I thought Noah was in costume today!"

Ewww! But also, interesting. I was discovering new benefits of being in costume. Noah, huh?

"Nope. Lucky me."

"Your Morty call was so . . . weird," she grumbled. "Even for you."

Erg. I have a deep voice. I was always in trouble in class for being too loud, even when I tried to whisper.

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"It was going great until that one kid—" I started.

"Is Morty talking? I heard Morty talk!" A little girl busted us. She looked about five but spoke like a seasoned journalist. "Morty, I have questions! Firstly, what were your whereabouts on May 26, 2019?"

What?

"Morty doesn't talk." Quinn turned to the girl and smiled. "He just moose-calls."

"AH-WOOO!" I yelled, startling both of them.

"Augh! Don't *do* that!" Quinn hissed.

"Are you *yelling* at Morty?" the little girl said. "Don't be mean to Morty!"

That attracted the attention of other nearby kids. And these kids were about to square up. I grinned under my mask. It wasn't often that my sister was thrown off her game.

"I'm not—I'm just—!" Quinn tripped over her words. "Augh! Morty needs to come with me. And fast. I have a line at the Morty-Go-Round."

My sister grabbed my hoof.

"Outta the way!" she barked at people. "Moose on the move! Shoo! Split! Va-MOOSE!"

She laughed. "I sound like Dad. Come on, Morty."

The park had gotten even more crowded, but Quinn ushered me to the main building and straight to the employees-only area. And to safety.

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"Thanks, Q," I said reluctantly, but gratefully.

"Remember, Morty doesn't speak." As she walked away, I heard her mutter, "Feel free to continue that at home."

"I heard that!" I called out, and shuffled down the hallway.

Without any fresh air circulating, my stench was stenching. I needed to breathe, fast. I got to the break-room door, pushed it open, and—

BAM! I'd forgotten about my antlers again.

My left antler smacked the doorframe and knocked me off-balance, and I fell into the break room. When I tried to catch myself, my hand-hoof launched a pizza, game tokens, and a pile of papers right off the lunch table. I was like a moose-nado spinning out of control. Finally I landed face down. On the floor.

"Well, that was some entrance," someone said.

Are you kidding me?! Someone witnessed that? But wait. I was still anonymous. I got up on my hooves and knees and attempted to stand up to escape.

And that was when I broke Rule #1. For real.

I lost my head.

The moose head fell off and rolled away.

Unmasked! Oh. No. I pulled myself up off the floor.

And that was when I saw him.

Brown hair with bleached highlights. Green eyes looking directly back at me. He looked like he smelled clean, like laundry detergent or soap. He wore a crisp, wrinkle-free

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blue button-down shirt. His only flaw was a piece of pepperoni oozing down the front of that shirt and whoops, that was thanks to me. He was tilting back in his chair, the front legs balanced perfectly in the air.

The cutest boy I'd ever seen.

Our eyes locked, and I swear I felt an electric charge, crackling.

Time.

Seemed.

To.

Stand.

Still.

I shivered. He looked stunned as well. What was happening between us?!

"You okay?" he asked. "Wow, you look . . . hot."

The boy spoke as smoothly as that swoop of hair across his forehead.

Wait, did he just say I looked *hot*? The electricity between us *was* positively sizzling! I finally knew the true meaning of the word "swoon."

Oh no. No, no, no. I realized the fatal flaw of this meet-cute as my face flushed with heat.

Literally hot.

Because: moose.