

"The Misses Moses," from my collection *Aliens in the Prime of Their Lives* (Norton 2010)

by Brad Watson

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from ***Aliens in the Prime of Their Lives***

The Moses sisters lived together, alone, in the fine old brick house near downtown where they had grown up. Who knows why neither had ever married. The older, larger one, sure, you could imagine reasons. The younger, frail one, maybe she'd been too timid. It wasn't hard to think she'd been pretty. She had bones as delicate as a mouse's. A mouse is beautiful, if you really look at it.

She, the smaller Miss Moses, pushed open the screen door from their front porch with a hand that was itself mousishly thin and delicate.

"Please do come in," she said.

The larger Miss Moses stood behind her, big arms folded, as if blocking further entrance. She smiled, too, but there was some kind of obvious skepticism, as if she were thinking, *I could take you, buster. Don't try anything with me.*

All I wanted was a cheap, clean apartment for a few months, till things got better. I already wished my mother had not put me in touch with these two.

The house had that little old lady smell, like a spotless, dust-free, uninhabited attic. Old, expensive rugs and drapes in some late stage of decrepitude, their worn, exhausted fibers a molecular stage above disintegration. Dark, heavy wooden tables and sideboard and china cabinet. Hard stuffed chairs and sofa covered with sheen-blotched silk and heavy fabric that looked like a softened, premium burlap. Cloudy mirrors in baroque frames.

We went into the kitchen, which was large, and sat at an oval kitchen table with chrome legs and skirt and a kind of faux-marble Formica surface. It looked like the Misses Moses's single concession to modernity, a moment in maybe 1959, since which there had been no more of that.

The smaller Miss Moses sat in one of the chairs — they matched the table, with chrome frames and faux-marble vinyl cushioned seats — and said, "We were just about to make some pimento cheese. Would you like some?"

"You're going to make it?" I said. I guess I'd never thought about someone taking cheddar cheese and mayonnaise and pimentos and making pimento cheese in their own home.

A knowing smile crept into the small, soft face of the smaller Miss Moses. You could tell she creamed her face every night — that's what my grandmother had called it, "I have to go cream my face," she'd say — you could smell the sweet, milky residue still in her pores. She looked over at the larger Miss Moses, and the larger Miss Moses pursed her lips in a satisfied way, nodded, and went over to the Frigidaire to get out the ingredients for the pimento cheese.

A large ceramic bowl the color of skim milk, with a pattern of thin blue curling lines, sat in the center of the table between cut-glass salt and pepper shakers and an empty wooden napkin holder.

Next to the bowl stood one of those old tin box graters. A long-handled wooden spoon lay in the empty bowl. While the smaller Miss Moses sat and watched, occasionally turning to smile at me and make conversation, the larger Miss Moses took the spoon from the bowl, set the box grater in there, and began grating the cheese.

She did it slowly and without effort. Her arms looked strong. They had seemed fat, but it was that hard fat you see on fat guys who work with their hands, mechanics, or butchers, or middle-age moving van guys. It was impressive.

The smaller Miss Moses kept turning her sweet little face to smile at me and ask if I wanted a Co-Cola.

They seemed in no hurry to show me the apartment.

"You don't smoke, do you," said the larger Miss Moses. It wasn't a question, ending on a down note. Not exactly *not* a question, but one for which the proper answer was assumed.

"We could smell it, if you did," said the smaller Miss Moses with a guileless little grin. "And we know you don't drink," she added. I saw the larger Miss Moses raise her heavy eyebrows and drop her gaze to the cheese she was grating. Her poor little sister would get a reprimand for that, later on.

"I used to smoke, too, of course," I said, wanting to help the smaller Miss Moses out of her gaffe. "But I quit when I got the chance." I smiled at them and shrugged. "Why not?"

The smaller Miss Moses leaned forward and nodded, her expression one of earnest concern and sober agreement, but before she could say something else the larger Miss Moses moved us on.

"Yes, it's a filthy habit," she said. "It's a sign of good character that you could stop."

I had handed my pack of Camels to the counselors and said, You might as well take these, while we're at it, and they had laughed, waved them off, said, No we don't even try to deal with those things here. I handed them over, anyway. I remember that I recalled the scene in *The Stranger* where Mersault, in jail, can't smoke and says at first he was jittery, nauseous, resentful. Then he says, "Later on I realized that that too was part of the punishment. But by then I had gotten used to not smoking and it wasn't a punishment anymore." Remembering this again, sitting there with the Misses Moses, I almost laughed a little bit, and they must have taken my expression to be one of cheerful agreement. Their faces relaxed again, the smaller Miss Moses's into her sweet front-porch

smile, the larger's into her own, which I decided was indeed just a little bit smug.

By this time the larger Miss Moses had finished making the pimento cheese.

"Would you like a sandwich?" she said.

"Or we can put you a little bit on a saucer, with some crackers," the smaller Miss Moses said.

I said I would very much like some of the pimento cheese, but as politely as I could I added that I might enjoy it more if we waited until after I had seen the apartment.

"Oh, of course," the smaller Miss Moses exclaimed in a voice that was nearly hushed, as if she were mortified they hadn't offered to do this before offering me the sandwich.

"Oh, no, it was very kind of you to offer it," I said. Still, she was embarrassed.

The larger Miss Moses covered the bowl of pimento cheese with a kitchen towel and said, "Come this way, we'll go in through the carport."

I followed her through the kitchen doorway into the carport, the smaller Miss Moses toddling behind me. The apartment was in a low, square addition on the carport's far side, entered through a plain wooden door. Inside, it was mostly one large room, a double bed in one corner, a sitting area in another, with an old television set and an easy chair and a coffee table. The opposite wall of the room opened into a tiny kitchen and, off of that, a tiny dark bathroom. All in all, it wasn't so different from other apartments I'd rented in the past, when I was younger and single.

Maybe because I stood there just inside the apartment doorway, taking the place in, blinking a bit, and saying nothing, the Moses sisters took my expression to be one of critical concern.

"Our previous tenants have all found it to be quite comfortable," the larger Miss Moses said.

"And we don't charge much for it," the smaller Miss Moses said. "We don't do it for the money, not at all."

I looked at her and smiled.

"It looks fine," I said. She seemed relieved.

"We want people to be happy," she said, as if she felt this almost desperately. "Would you like to sit on the bed? It's old but very comfortable."

The larger Miss Moses chuckled and gave her sister a mildly critical look.

"Now, Karen, when was the last time you laid on that old bed? Go on, now," she said to me. "Try it out." The smaller Miss Moses seemed a little crushed.

I went over to the bed and carefully laid myself onto it, keeping my shoes off to the side, off the coverlet. They both watched me. It was strange, looking at them from that angle.

"It's fine," I said. "Feels good."

The smaller Miss Moses grinned, and the larger Miss Moses smiled also, in a confident way, as if vindicated.

"Come into the kitchen, then," she said.

In the kitchen she ran cold, then hot water from the faucet into the sink.

"Pressure's good," she said. "And the hot water tank is only ten years old. We never have a problem with the drains."

"Oh, no," the smaller Miss Moses affirmed.

The larger Miss Moses stepped over to the stove, a small gas model, and turned all the burner dials, causing each of the four to gently harrumph into blue flame. We said nothing, watching them burn small and beautifully for a moment, and then one by one she shut them off.

Then we went to the door to the bathroom, just off the kitchen. The larger Miss Moses flicked on the light switch with a thick finger and two fluorescent tubes on either side of the medicine cabinet mirror flickered on with the sound of someone tapping a tiny fork against a china cup. Once illuminated, the tubes buzzed quietly. The larger Miss Moses ran water into the sink, then ran water into the tub. She flushed the toilet, and we all three stood there crowded into the little bathroom and watched the water swirl

and kerplunk down the drainpipe and gurgle as the bowl and tank refilled themselves.

Out in the main room again, I said that I would be pleased to rent the apartment from them, if they saw fit to rent it to me.

"Oh, marvelous," the smaller Miss Moses said, her smile beatific. The larger Miss Moses smiled grimly and nodded.

"Well, then, how about that sandwich?" she said.

I said yes, I would love to have the sandwich, and so we went back into their kitchen and the smaller Miss Moses and I sat down again at the table. The larger Miss Moses set a loaf of white bread beside the bowl of pimento cheese and the jar of mayonnaise. She set out small plates and found a new package of paper napkins and set those out for us, too. Then she sat down and the smaller Miss Moses began to make our sandwiches, spooning the pimento cheese onto slices of bread, and spreading mayonnaise onto the second slices. She put them together, and cut them into neat triangular halves, and handed the little plates with our sandwiches on them back to us. When she set mine in front of me, she paused and looked into my eyes with such feeling, I was taken aback and embarrassed.

"We're so sorry about your family," she said. I saw the larger Miss Moses stiffen. "Maybe it will all work out, in time." The larger Miss Moses frowned and laid a large hand on the small, slim hand of her sister. The smaller Miss Moses drew up like a little night flower sensing the twilight. She seemed about to speak again, to peep something, but then I saw the larger Miss Moses's hand tighten a bit, dropping her into silence, her lips visibly clamped shut, eyes large and baleful.

"I'm sorry, Percy," she said to her sister.

We began to eat.

I had watched as the larger Miss Moses had spooned scarlet pimentos onto the orange mound of grated cheddar cheese, and as she had stirred in a dollop of the mayonnaise — which looked homemade, because the jar was a Mason jar with no label, and the

mayonnaise was a little off-white, instead of the white-white color of the store-bought kind.

"This is delicious," I said to them as I munched the sandwich. "It must be the homemade mayonnaise."

Their eyes brightened.

"Yes," said the larger Miss Moses. The smaller Miss Moses seemed to blush then, as if I had chucked her diminutive chin and told her how pretty she was. They watched me eat the sandwich. The look in their eyes was almost tragic.

