Coyote Tries Again

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Coyote Tries Again

Coyote was waiting
He was patient
Coyote was looking around
What should he do next?

Another day.
She sat up stiffly. Rubbing her neck, she looked around at the mess. Bottles
and cans everywhere. Her only plant, the one with small, pink flowers was splat­
tered on the rug, her new K-mart gold and green rug. One leafy tendril clung to
the soil, blossom erect. Petals, leaves, stems, edged in morning after.

Using a coffee table for support, she got off the sagging couch. Movement was
painful. She frowned, causing deep lines to appear around her mouth and forehead.
She clenched her teeth. "Damn those guys," she said, limping into the bathroom.
Alma, friend and roommate, was sleeping in the bathtub. Her long hair flowed
in a tangled dark mass across her shoulders and breasts. "Alma, get up. What
are you doing?"
Alma pulled her hair back, gripped the edges of the tub, and sat up. "Geez, Agnes.
Where'd you drag those guys in from?"
Agnes stared at her own image in the mirror. She tried to finger-comb her short
straight hair. "I look like a damn porcupine." A bruise darkened the left cheekbone,
seemed to give her an unbalanced look. Agnes could still taste the blood salt in
her mouth.
"Well?" Alma said.
"Well, what?" Agnes jerked the medicine cabinet open. "Christ, who stole the
aspirin?"
"Hangover city, hey?"
"Don't start."
"Trying to brighten the day. Anyway, those so-called friends you picked up. . ."
"Shut up."
"Sure, sure. Get pissed at me. The innocent one."
"Alma? Innocent? Ha."
"Yeah, well. . . Who were you scrapping with?"
"Don't really remember," Agnes turned toward Alma. "You know?"
Alma shook her head, "Hope, I locked myself in here."
"Shit. Some friend." Agnes slammed out, headed for the kitchen.
"Don't blame me." Alma yelled after her.
Looking for a glass, Agnes rumbled among the flood of aluminum cans, caus-
ing them to topple, to spill onto the floor. She turned on the water, letting it run, hoping it would get cold. Cold, like the creek below Ya-Ya’s house.

The cold creek used to freeze their legs and Ya-Ya would make them wear old shoes so their feet wouldn’t get cut by the rocks and they’d take turns hauling water in a big silver bucket and in the summer it would sweat cold drops on the outside of the bucket and she’d place her hot cheeks and forehead against the coldness, and along the path from the house stickers towered over her and thornberries would tower over them both and sometimes they’d make themselves small, waiting to ambush someone with darts collected from foxtails that grew in the fields; and in winter Uncle would chop wood, they’d all get stacked with an armload for the wood-box to feed the stove where pots of stew and fry bread were cooking and tea was warming and the table was really three tables covered in vinyl and cloth, everyone had a place to sit, and the meal prayer was a rising and falling, like wind blowing, softly lifting, and the language, the Salish words, marred by English, were tones of scolding or laughter, bringing gossip from across the way, and tales of Coyote and his brother Fox reminded you, guided you; and in spring apple blossoms filtered into the upstairs window where they all slept under a roof that housed birds who had built nests and they would waken her with their song, floating from behind the grey boards, and she felt safe, even when Ya-Ya scolded Grandpa about the nests; then the rains turned the road to slick white mud and everyone had to push the old brown pickup out, and Grandpa would curse the clay, making a new road through the field; in fall they’d camp out in the woods, drying meat, and hunters would have deer, sometimes elk, hanging from the trees, ready; the prayers were mixed with the roots and berries and canned goods in a feast that filled the air with wood smoke, at night the coldness of the creek would sneak up and she had to bury under quilts, falling asleep to the heartbeat of the drum and the voices that carried to caves and dens of bears and mountain lions. Then they were sent to school at the Ursulines, punished for speaking the words of Salish, some ran away, some got hands smacked with rulers, and she was always hungry, even with three meals a day and when she was assigned to clean the choir she would play unholy songs on the organ. Sent to bed. No supper. She laughed at the little boy, swinging his rosary saying, “Wanna go for a ride Jesus?” Sacreligious. Sent to bed. No supper. She found that no red-faced nun could stop her thoughts and she’d play the confession game, making up sins to see how many Our Father’s and Hail Mary’s the priest would give her and when he came into the sixth grade and lectured in an unsteady voice, with menacing overtones, about “petting” she thought he was talking about something else.

“Remember that Agnes?” Alma was laughing at her and winking at Aaron, all in the same moment. They had both decided to head to town to “Check out the scene,” as Alma said. They walked the quarter mile from “Injun town” to Arlee. Alma’s boy friend was in the Log Cabin Bar and Cafe, playing pool. Agnes glared at Alma, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

“At least I didn’t get caught stealing spuds. Remember, we all waited for you. I had the salt and What’s-Her-Name, that girl from Elmo, stole a knife from the
lunch room. We were hungry and you let us down," Agnes turned her back on Alma. "Give me an Oly."

"Listen to Miss Indian America. Miss Pisses-in-her-pants."

"At least I don't let my friends down."

"Whoa, hey, hey. No fighting." Aaron held up his hands. "When you two get started it gets dangerous, you know?" He had stepped between them. "You and you can forget yesterday. Let's get drunk or . . ." pointing at Agnes, "you can get stoned. Whatever you want. Here." He shoved a fifty-cent piece at Agnes. "Play some good beer drinking music."

"You guys never want any trouble, do you, until you start it!" Agnes grabbed the silver, walked over to the juke box, put it in the slot. She began pushing buttons at random.

"Burned out bums playing burned out tunes for burned out bums." Waylon and Willie jumped on the turntable.

"To the water," Agnes said to the Olympia "Eternal" waterfall cascading into nothingness.

Their Sweat House was by the Creek. When the door was opened and she came out of the heat, her body and spirit were opened to the wind. The plunge into the cold water fired the senses, disturbing the sleeping center, pulling it awake. She was startled. Cedar and Pine whispered; she could touch their roughness, smell their needles, feel their roots reaching deep into the Earth, feeding the Earth, being fed by the Earth. Water, the water tasted more than sweet, more than cold. Woodpecker, Magpie, and Crow singing and drumming. The song reaching her, telling her, reminding her. You are Whole. You are Part. You are Us. We are You. Return. Live.

Alma and Aaron were playing pool, bumping into each other, fooling around. Agnes, slouched over the bar, half on and half off a stool, was listening to an old man. He was drunk, his short white hair sticking out from a greasy green cap.

"We went over there . . . got our . . . our asses shot off." His eyes, moist, bleary, surrounded by wrinkles, darted here and there, like he was talking to a bunch of people. "Still got my uniform . . ." His lower lip hung slightly, a thin layer of white spit formed at the corners of his mouth, reminding Agnes of a rabid dog. "Almost got married . . ." His hand shook, holding his glass of whiskey, trying not to spill any. "They respected us Indians then . . . Those white bastards . . . beneath us." Agnes wondered if that was all he knew—World War II. He licked his lips, downed the drink, made a smacking noise. "Hey, girlie, got a dollar?" His voice rasped, seemed to hang in the air.

"Hey old-timer," Aaron said, "forget the war. Today is where the action's at."

"What do you know, you dope-addict." He waved his arms around. "We went over there."

"That's all you know. Still fighting those Germans, huh? See any Germans here?" He grabbed the old man by the shoulders and started to spin him around. "Grab your rifle, they might be under the table. Look over there."
The old man tried to take a swing, but Aaron stepped back, the old man lost his balance, his cap fell to the floor. "You should be thanking me... Thanking me." He stumbled into a bar stool. Agnes steadied him.

"Leave him alone, let him remember," she said.
The old man started speaking in Salish; rapidly gesturing, pointing at Aaron.
"Buy him a drink," Agnes said.
"I'm not his personal banker. Buy it yourself."
Agnes stepped closer to Aaron. "Do it. Or I'll remember about a certain girl from Yakima."

Aaron quickly glanced at Alma, but she had turned her attention back to the pool table, concentrating on her shot.
"Shit, give the old fucker a drink, no harm to me." He threw a ten dollar bill on the bar and turned away.

"Took on seven Marine Bastards, whipped them all," the old man said. "All those Germans... took off, ran. I had power then..." His head was getting nearer to the bar, he was ready to lay on his arms. "I knew the songs then." Agnes watched him, heard him whisper, "The songs knew me." He closed his eyes, head on his arms.

"Hey." The bartender yelled at Agnes. "Don't let him pass out in here. I don't want any of you drunk Indians passing out in here."

"Shit, Harry," Agnes got off her stool. "Who the fuck buys those shiny shirts you always wear, huh?"

Aaron said, "Don't be starting no trouble, Agnes."
"And who," Agnes felt her hands clenching, "keeps your fat assed wife in food?"
"Cool off," Harry said, grabbing the billy club from under the bar. "Cool her off," he told Aaron. "Just take that old wino out of here, there won't be no trouble."

The old man jerked up, looked at the bartender, pointed at him. "We got our butts shot off for you... Fought Hitler... a wino fought Hitler for your stinking homes. You fucking white ass-hole."

Harry had the club on his shoulder. He took a step toward the old man. As soon as Harry was in range, the old man spit on him. White liquid ran down his red shiny shirt.

Harry, the bartender, changed. His eyes narrowed into slits, his nostrils flared slightly, his lips taut against yellowed teeth. He raised the club into the air.
"You get out." His voice was low, almost a growl. "Get out."

Alma pulled Agnes back, "Come on Agnes, it's pointless." She tried to push Agnes to the door.
"We're going man," Aaron said, keeping the pool table between him and Harry.

The old man kept pointing at Harry; some of his words were in English, some in Salish. "My sumesh is strong. I can still use medicine."

He started to work up another spit. Harry faked a hit toward him, he dodged, got off balance. He tried to grab the bar edge, knocked over a can of Oly. His fingers slipped in the beer, he grabbed for the stool, knocking it over. Fingers clawed the air uselessly, he fell back, hitting his head on the chrome rung that still held bits of white mud from people's feet. He slumped to the floor.
Agnes' slim body was trembling, “You white bastard.” She'd picked up the old man's shot glass, intending to throw it at Harry. He hit her first, not hard, but hard enough to knock her to the floor, hard enough for her nose to start bleeding.

Alma picked up a pool cue and hit Harry across the forehead. Blood poured from the gash, blinding him. He began hollering, “Damn it, Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ.”

Aaron was already dragging the old man out the door; Alma helped Agnes to her feet, they both stumbled to the door. Alma took a glance over her shoulder and saw one of the guys cutting the telephone wire, he waved her out the door.

Aaron was behind the wheel, the car running. The old man leaned against the door window in the front seat. Alma shoved her friend into the back seat, climbed in beside her.

“Get going,” she yelled.

Agnes lay against the seat, felt the coolness of the seat against her cheek, felt her tears, tasted the blood.

Sweat House was showing her, leading her... Try. Live. Just before they opened the door she was overwhelmed by the smell of Juniper; she could taste it, felt it getting under her skin through her pores. It swirled her around, found her center. The smell of Juniper penetrated her soul. Darkness pulled her through to herself.

“Why’d he do that?” Agnes was holding a kleenex to her nose. Aaron was driving north on 93. The old man was still, leaning against the window.

“Who can figure those Suyapi’s out,” Alma said, handing her more tissues.

“Alma, something happened back there, something...”

“I stuck my neck out for you, that’s what happened.”

“That too. Geez, you really hit him.”

“Shit, you spoiled a good party,” Aaron said. “You okay?”

“She’s okay,” Alma said.

Agnes could feel the hollowness inside her starting to shift, to move, making her uncomfortable. She wanted to cry, to make huge sobbing sounds, but couldn't. The motion of the car seemed to sweep under her.

“Stop, let me out,” she said.

Aaron pulled off the highway. Agnes got out, holding the side of the car. She began shivering; the beer and whiskey left her in a rush of vomit. Alma was beside her, holding her as another acid stream of puke left her body. Agnes pressed her forehead against the car. “So cool, so cool,” she said. “I just want to go to sleep.”

Inside the car the old man moaned, blinked his eyes for a few seconds. “Valley Creek,” he said, “take me to Valley Creek.”

“Not tonight,” Aaron said. “The party’s not over yet.”

Agnes was getting back into the car. “Take him.”

“What. This is my car. We’re heading for Mission. To the Silver Dollar.”

“Do it.”
Sweat House was calling, singing.
When she first went in, she was afraid, didn’t know if she could take the heat. The door closed, darkness surrounded her. She could hear the water being poured on hot rocks. The hissing was followed by a wave of steam that swirled around her nakedness; she breathed the moistness, drawing in deep breaths, releasing the waste a piece at a time.
She heard the start of the song; it seemed to hang like Hummingbird before a flower. She joined in, imagining the song flying like Butterfly—dipping, landing, lifting—powdery wings beating in time with her heart.
Floating, far above the domed, womb-like darkness, she thought, “I’m dancing.”

The car was traveling along a gravel road, trailing dust behind it. He was talking about the Sweat House, how it came to be given to the People, how Coyote liked to fool you if you weren’t careful. “I still have a song,” the old man said.

“This old man is really out of it tonight,” Aaron said.
“No,” Agnes said. “That’s what happened.”
“Ah, just stories to tell little kids,” Aaron said.
“Over here. That road.” The old man pointed to an old road overgrown with grass. They came to the creek; Sweat House was standing, its ribs exposed. Willows were bent to form a dome shape, tied with sinew; planted firmly in the earth, some of the twigs were forming leaves—the living Sweat House. The fire pit was empty, waiting.
Agnes got out of the car. The water seemed to be whispering. She could hear rocks being rolled around, scraping against each other.
The old man was out too. “My house,” he said.
Agnes looked at him. He seemed to be younger. It must be the darkness, she thought.
“I still have the song.” His voice carried across the creek, seemed to lift him, making him stand taller.
She knew the song. It was one she had sung with her Grandmother. With all the Grandmothers. She joined him, feeling the power of it.
“They’re both crazy drunk,” Aaron said.
“I don’t know,” Alma said.

Sweat House waited. The Creek was telling the round rocks: Get ready; Prepare. Somewhere wood was being gathered, cut. Blankets folded. The People were singing a preparing Song, their footsteps rustling through the woods, getting closer. Dawn brushed the Mountain snow, the tops touched by swirling pink light. Another day.

Coyote wasn’t laughing
He heard the song
He was mad
Coyote began singing his own song
He was patient
He began looking around
What should he do next?