

# **COYOTE**

**Colin Winnette**

For any always elsewhere.

**COYOTE**

WE WERE ON the porch most of the night before she vanished. Just grilling and eating things like hot dogs and potatoes. Her Dad grilled the buns so they got all sweet and burnt-tasting on the edges. We drank beers and watched her pick at the heads of nails sticking up out of the splintering blue wood. Her Dad played guitar a little, songs I didn't know other than when he played them.

I didn't like to drink in front of her. I never got comfortable with it, not really. But that night I just gave into it and drank and she seemed happy enough and even her Dad seemed a little happy. Or at least that's how I remember it.

It was getting dark but we sat out a little longer while the bugs gathered up to the house lights. They were in her long hair, getting tangled. She got a bite or something that made her come over and get up in my lap. Coyotes used to come by all the time back then, but I can't remember if they did that night or not. We'd hear them circling and sounding off like maniacs, real high-pitched wailing like some hysterical woman lost out in the woods.

One time one came right up onto the porch and her Dad got him with a shovel while I watched from the kitchen. He cracked it once and then a few more times for good measure. He wanted to eat the thing, brought it inside wrapped in a t-shirt from the thrift bag, but there was no way she or I was going to get involved with that. So he buried

it in the yard with the dog, two cats, and a hamster from before. The roads near us aren't busy, but they're busy enough. They're constantly littered with all kinds of dead or dying. Everything that escapes winds up out there eventually. That's the way it seems at least. Her Dad has brought every escapee back to us in a tarp.

I'VE TOLD THE SAME story over and over again, to the police, to the reporters, to the prep-interviewers and interviewers and celebrity guests and you name it. I tell the same story every time: we put her to bed, and when we woke up she was gone.

THE FIRST TIME I thought being a mother might have deranged me, I was watching her play in the yard. This was back when Spot was alive, our first dog. All black with a white spot on his chest. Creative people, we aren't really. She was throwing sticks and he was chasing them. I only went inside for a second, to fill my glass, but I heard Spot cry out and then he was there at the back porch. I couldn't tell where the blood was coming from at first. It hid in streams of long black hair, pooling in the white diamond at his chest, dyeing the whole thing red as a new car.

Before I brought him in I scanned the yard for her, but I didn't see her so I went looking. Spot stayed on the porch, whimpering a little and wanting some help, I'm sure, but I was getting a little worried, wondering where she might have gone to. Your mind starts filling with so many ideas about what could have happened.

I pictured someone cutting her and Spot, someone hurting them, someone taking her, running away with her. I even pictured her as a monster, just a little bit. Not that I didn't forgive her immediately. She wouldn't have known what she was doing. I'd done things as a kid that were hurtful, dangerous, just not knowing. I killed a few animals through sheer curiosity and aggressive ignorance. Drowned a hamster, suffocated a cat beneath a mattress. I never meant any harm.

I pictured her experimenting with Spot. The ways she might have hurt him without understanding the cruelty of what she'd done. And it was right when those images were at the peak of intensity that I found her in the bushes, just crying and curled up there, innocent as Eve.

Spot started hurting, she told me later.

I had carried her into the house, crying there in my arms, and set her on the counter by the sink. I wiped at her face with a rag but every tear I wiped away was immediately replaced with a new one.

How did he start hurting?

He just did, she said. She was open-mouthed crying then, like a wail, like she did when she was a baby.

So I let it drop.

I didn't care what happened anymore. I just wanted her to stop crying. I held her as close to my heart as possible. I don't know why, but I get the feeling it's warmest there. She balled up in my arms and I held her while she cried and I bounced her. I swayed a little, watched the window. It was just a normal afternoon, with that sharp afternoon light on the curtains. I watched that until she seemed weightless in my arms. Until she grew quiet and her sounds were replaced by Spot's there at the door. It could have been a human being, begging, and it wouldn't have mattered to me. I only wanted her to quiet down and curl up.

HER DAD AND I don't sleep anymore, but we still get into bed. We shut our eyes from time to time, until our eyelids get sore or just seem to open up on their own. We'll be quiet for hours. Not tossing, not turning. Just there on our backs with our arms at our sides or folded in our laps. I ask him, What was our daughter like?, and he can only say one hundred percent true things that can't be argued.

She was without visible flaws, he says.

She had tiny hands, like a puppy that is never going to get any bigger.

She had thin brown hair.

She ate what we worried might be too much ketchup, liked it on tacos.

She preferred her water warm.

She wasn't scared of anything, even the coyotes.

She really only cried when she could tell we thought she might. She was an opportunist.

She reminded me of the scarred-up girls in high school. Quiet, funny, solitary, like the best thing I could do for her was to stay out of her way.

She worried about the characters in books from the very first page. Is he sad? she would ask. Over and over.

ALL OF HER TOYS were put away. The bed was made, as if we'd never placed her in it. The back door was open, but the screen was closed. That's the way we did it during the fall. The way we'd done it for years. The screen door slams, and we've been meaning to fix it. It's loud enough for us to notice. But neither of us did. If she went out, if someone came in, we should have heard it. But we didn't hear anything.

Her Dad and I fought the next night. He took it upon himself to burn all the pictures. What got into him? Beer, I guess. Something strong, maybe. He spends nearly all his home time in a folding chair on the porch or on his back in bed. He was there and I came out and said, Where are all the pictures?

After a moment, he told me he'd burned them. Dug a hole in the yard and burned them and most of the toys and kid diapers and a bunch of things he couldn't remember. Then he buried it all.

I screamed at him, of course, and demanded to know what right he thought he had and that kind of thing, and he took it for a while until he decided he couldn't do that anymore and we started hitting one another. Hitting is one of those things everyone tells themselves they would never put up with. Then you get shoved one night during a fight that's more intense than usual. If you're me, and you've got a two year-old who's looking up to you, you shove back. If you're lucky, it ends

there and you skulk around feeling mad for days and swearing you're going to leave if he ever does something like that again. And he doesn't, not for months. Then there's another shove, maybe a push, a hand raised, something like that. And it's the same thing all over again, only you get over it a little more easily. You drive your daughter around, talking to her all the while. You drive and watch the road and ask questions, as if to an empty car. Then a little voice somewhere in the back chirps up, says something about fences and cows, sounding so in love with the world that you just forget most of what's horrible and feel grateful for what you have. However little it is. You head home and find him there and he's different. You hold onto the shove like a photograph of a dead relative. Every now and then, when you look at it, you feel something stirring. But mostly your thoughts turn elsewhere.

MY THOUGHTS ARE ALWAYS turning elsewhere. I look at one thing for a bit, then I turn to another in mid-thought. Her Dad calls it “fluttering.” It’s why I’m a lousy cook. It’s why the house is filled with little piles. A few magazines here, some mail with return services requested. Her Dad used to get sad a lot about nothing. It felt like a similar thing. We would be sitting out back or riding in the car, having a perfectly nice time, or a quiet time, at least, and he would just take on this look of intense sadness. It was always “nothing.” His thoughts had just turned.

But when you have a child, that kind of thing doesn’t fly. It’s when you’re not paying attention that they suddenly seem to need it most. When we were alone, her Dad and me, our minds could wander. He could dig deep into whatever sadness he was feeling and drink it out or just stare until his eyes began to water. And I could flutter. But with her around, it was different. She snapped us into focus. That’s not to say we didn’t drift. We just couldn’t get lost anymore.

I CUT OFF her Dad's hair one night. Cut my own too. I can't say exactly when it was. He used to have this long hair, tied up in a ponytail most of the time. It came off with a couple snips, in one big clump. It was wild to look at, gathered up in a little black tie. He was asleep in a chair on the porch. He didn't even wake up. But he came in when I was working at mine. Hunched over the sink, just cutting whatever felt right. He didn't even know all that I'd done. He only asked me why I was doing what I was doing. And I didn't have an answer. So he watched for a little while then went to bed. And then he noticed.

I STILL DON'T KNOW why I did the hair thing. It was otherwise a pretty good day. A hollowed-out branch the length of our house broke loose from an oak in the backyard the day before. Her Dad went at it with a chainsaw, chopping it down to small blocks for firewood and for selling. It was dead wood mostly, not particularly useful. But he kept at it for hours, and I just watched from the porch. Some days I can sit back and do nothing at all, and this was one of those days. I was a nurse for awhile, but I'm not anymore. At least I don't think I am. I stopped going and no one's said anything to me about it. Maybe if I showed up in my scrubs, clocked in, and went about my day, no one would say anything about that either. Maybe I'll try it some day.

He took a shower after piling the wood and sat with me on the porch. He fell asleep there after only a few minutes, one of those little naps he used to take without warning. I watched him for a while then started to feel anxious. I can't say what about. I would if I could, but I just don't remember exactly. It had something to do with the way he was breathing. It seemed insufficient, like maybe he wasn't getting enough air. I saw it as a joke, my coming at him with the scissors. I kept imagining that he would wake up right as I was about to do it and I thought it would be funnier and funnier the closer I was to finishing the cut. Then I finished the cut. There was nothing really that funny about it. So I set at my own, to see if that could work too. The joke

didn't land. It just made me feel crazy. We fought a little but he gave up pretty quick. After that, neither of us could get to sleep. That might have been the first time.