

Coyote Mother

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In my dream, I heard my neighbor's terrified screams and I grabbed my pistol and ran outside. A huge coyote had attacked the neighbor's young son and was attempting to drag the boy out of the yard. The mother threw herself at the animal, smashing at it with a broom until the coyote's attention turned to her. Screams echoed around me and blood poured from wounds. Almost calmly I raised the gun and shot the coyote between the eyes. It fell partially on my neighbor, who continued her anguished wails as she covered her son with her own body. I pulled the animal off mother and child, shouting to another neighbor to call 911.

I awakened and wondered. Gun? I have never owned a gun. And I couldn't imagine myself shooting *any* animal. One isolated part of the dream returned; the small silver pistol feeling so comfortably and coldly familiar in my hand. It was flat on the sides, not the western-style pistol my father had owned with its polished wooden handle and round, black barrel. No, this was more fitting for my hand and rather foreign looking.

A memory drifted into my mind, bits and pieces that had to be combined in the correct sequence. I was very young and in my grandparents' house. My grandfather sent me to his bedroom to get something for him. In his night stand drawer I saw a compact silver gun and picked it up. It was heavy for my small hands, but I could get my fingers on the trigger.

I walked purposely to the kitchen where my mother and grandmother were standing at the sink preparing lunch. Holding the gun in both hands, I pointed it at my mother's back and solemnly said, "Ban, ban, you're dead."

I strained to remember the rest of it, but could only recall my grandmother arguing heatedly with my grandfather. But did I actually remember the incident or was the story repeated to me?

I had come to realize that memory is unreliable and can trick us into believing falsehoods. My favorite cousin, Martha, stayed with me for a few days and visited my dying mother in the nursing home. Martha and I sat on my back porch late at night talking about the yearly family gatherings that took place during our childhood. We would convene at our grandparents' rambling house on the Chesapeake Bay in an orgy of food and conversation, laughter and tears. I reminded Martha of a specific acrimonious argument between my mother and our grandfather which we both witnessed. Martha's version of the confrontation differed significantly from mine. How could that be? Each of us is intelligent, observant, and honest. But clearly her memory was not my memory. We saw through different eyes and remembered with different hearts. Was that why my mother and grandfather told such wildly divergent stories about their antagonist relationship?

I telephoned my sister, Claire, in Chicago and told her that Mother's condition was worsening. She listened politely, but the rancor in my sister's voice murmured over the line. She suggested that I telephone when it was all over, and hung up.

What did I expect? When I called four months earlier to tell her that Mother had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and wouldn't live six months, Claire scornfully asked what I wanted her to do about it. Feel bad?

"I'm sorry, but only for you if you feel obligated to her," she said, her voice only slightly softened. "That woman made too many of my years miserable and she'll not get the chance to turn her hateful expression on me again. I can't deal with her and I'm not going to try."

In this situation, it seemed that Claire and I had similar memories.

I walked softly down the shining vinyl-floored hallway of the nursing home, stopping in front of Mother's door to peep inside. She was propped up in bed, gaunt and chalky white except for the darker circles under her eyes. She stared blankly at the television, unaware of my presence. I watched her as I had many times during my childhood and felt that old familiar anxiety gather in my chest. I would find her staring out the window or into empty space as if there was not one reason on this earth for her to exist. Sometimes she was drunk. I often wondered why she was so bleakly disappointed with her life. Did I never ask her because I was afraid of the answer?

I was halfway into the room before she saw me. She nodded, but as usual, didn't smile. She was neither wild-eyed with pain nor caustically wishing to vaporize the entire world with one sweep of her arm. I sat down quietly and watched the rest of an old comedy show with her. After it ended, she clicked the remote to turn off the TV and leaned her head back against the pillows with her eyes closed. I had to find something to talk about.

Trying to fill the emptiness in the room I told her about my dream. She made no comment. I babbled on, telling her what I remembered about finding the gun in Grandfather's drawer.

She opened her eyes but didn't look at me. "I heard you come into the kitchen," she began in a raspy, phlegm-filled voice. "You said, 'Bang, bang, you're dead.' I turned around and saw you aiming the gun at me, your little forefingers locked together on the trigger. Even before I heard your grandmother gasp, I knew the gun was real. And knowing your grandfather, I figured it was loaded. I said calmly but firmly, 'Lay down the gun...carefully, on the chair with the gun pointed toward the door.' I guess there was something in my voice...you did as you were told. That was unusual for you, even then." Her breathing became labored and she reached for the oxygen mask. After several minutes she returned the mask to the tank beside her bed.

"Your grandmother was hysterical," Mother continued lethargically. "Your grandfather insisted it wasn't his fault, that you had opened the wrong drawer."

Mother wearily shook her head, grimacing with disdain...or was it pain? "That drawer was always supposed to be locked. The old fool claimed he needed a gun for self-protection. Humph!" she snorted contemptuously. "He probably would have shot himself if he had ever tried to use it."

Mother closed her eyes and sighed bitterly. "Too bad."

"What is too bad?"

"The gun. If you had killed me than, I would have skipped a lot of misery in my life." Turning her head toward me, she partially opened her eyes, a maliciously taunting half-smile on her face. "I'm sure you wanted to...plenty of times. Too bad you didn't"

I stared at her, knowing I should make some sort of denial. But I couldn't speak. I could only think about the dream and the smooth chill of the gun in my hand as I put a bullet between...whose eyes?