

Just Coyotes

Beside me Harah grabbed covers, threw them off, thrashing with her fever. My reading light burned down on her open face banked by strands of damp hair. Finally she sat up, slowly, and reached away from me for her dog-eared paperback, short stories of Poe called *Master of Terror*. She wore an old white turtleneck riding over her bare bum. I was wrapped up in Naoya's *The Paper Door*, a book of Japanese short stories which featured characters (usually the narrators) facing painful choices—like the husband caught in a crisis in his marriage caused by an affair with another woman. How to choose the proper course of action, to be true to himself when fate has presented him with another path?

Harah coughed wetly. I put a hand on her thigh, and kept reading. Not much longer to the end of the story. After that, maybe one more. The weekend had been a busy one for both of us. She'd dug new beds in an old section of garden, before succumbing to the chicken pox our daughter had brought home from school the previous week. I'd dug blackberries, greased the truck, stayed up late playing music with friends. I'd fished without luck by a cold, windblown river. Now my torpid limbs soaked up heat from Harah's fever under the winter covers.

"I wonder," she said while still looking at the page she was reading, "what I did during that week as a child." She was an only child, raised by a brutal father in a harbor town, after the unsolved murder of her mother.

"What week?" I knew that to continue reading now was fruitless. I looked at her blotchy complexion, her puffed temples.

"The week I chose not to get the chicken pox—saving it till now, instead."

“I don’t know.” I really wanted to finish Naoya’s story. The husband, a novelist, had arrived at a critical point of decision. In the meantime, life had to go on: he was reading his son a story about an enchanted lion, while his wife wept in the bath. Wept, I imagined, as Harah did in those black episodes in which she tried to express some deep pain locked inside her, and was never able to. Did she try? Did she really want to? Maybe it was only I who wanted her to. But now was not the time; her tone was too casual, the hour too late.

I fell asleep before finishing the story. That night I suffered vivid dreams of a teenaged girl who had been killing people (her mother and sister) and had buried their parts in the row-house backyard. Someone made her dig up the shallow graves, and she showed me the grisly, half-rotted remains. With horror in my heart, I tried to take a compassionate attitude toward her, as a neighbor, a friend. What could I do? I woke up in the gloomy dawn haunted by her words: “Then I’ll find a way to kill you.”

I tasted onions from the previous night’s supper, and blamed the nightmare on them. “I should have known better,” I said to Harah as I dressed. She lay glassy-eyed, unmoving, her head propped up on the reading pillow, the Poe book closed beside her, the reading light still on. “Are you all right? Did you stay up all night reading?”

“I’m fine,” she said with a slack mouth. “I couldn’t stop. I think my fever’s better.”

“I’ll make some breakfast for you. What do you feel like eating?”

“Hmm. Nothing I can think of. I’m not really hungry. You go ahead.”

It was not yet light out. Our nine-year-old daughter, Niki, was crying from her room down the hall, a tiny, distant wailing. When I got up and went to her to see what was the matter, she said she’d had a bad dream.

“Coyotes were coming after me. I tried to chase them away by throwing my chicken pox scabs at them, but it didn’t work.”

“So did they eat you, then?”

“Stop teasing.” She didn’t smile. It was hard to tell her freckles from the scars of the chicken pox.

Toast and jam, apple juice, mint tea. Harah had no appetite; Niki licked the last of the jam from his plate and said, “I’m still hungry.”

“I almost made eggs,” I pleaded.

“That’s all right,” they both said at once.

Niki told Harah of her dream.

Outside, the wind blew high and gusty. I retreated to my study, and from time to time glimpsed tantalizing patches of blue sky which never quite broadened through the gray March cloud cover. The writing went slowly. By the end of the afternoon I was ready for exercise... but hesitated before trading the cozy house for the damp, cold outside air.

Harah appeared in the study door, holding foamy glass mugs of homemade milkshake, and smiling.

I pushed my work away and leaned back in my chair. “You look like you’re doing better.”

“I think I may have turned the corner.” Her black eyes had a new sparkle.

“Did you manage to take a nap?”

“No, but I think I’ll have a hot bath now, then maybe try. Want to join me?”

“I was thinking of maybe taking a walk. I’m stuck on these revisions. I can’t decide which way the story wants to go. The weather doesn’t look that inviting, though.”

We sipped the milkshakes: Harah still in the door, me in my chair.

I felt vaguely disappointed, as if I wanted Harah to tell me which way to go, what to do. Or, was I just picking up on something she wanted from me, but wouldn’t say?

“Where’s Niki?”

“In her room coloring. I suggested she make a picture about that dream she had. Now she’s totally absorbed in it.”

“Good idea. Get the demons out.”

“Yeah, like that Poe guy. Maybe it’s better for some people to keep them in!”

“I don’t know. He might have been like his characters, then, instead of just writing about them.”

She drained her mug and looked at me strangely.

“What, are you afraid I’ve got some demons in me? We all do, I guess.” I finished my milkshake in a gulp and stood up. “Well, I guess that puts me over the hump. Might as well go out while there’s still daylight.”

I kissed her in the doorway on the way out. After days and nights of fever, her lips and cheeks now seemed cold. When I remarked on this, her black eyes sparkled and she replied, “Probably just the milkshake.”

I started with a leisurely climb along the deer-trail slanting up the wooded hillside to the east of the house. Where the ridge flattened out I eased into a loping run, enjoying the clean, cool air, the ground underfoot with its carpet of brown leaves. The birches stood bleakly awaiting the new

year's growth. I ran on through them to the cedar grove, where I stopped as I always do to stare up at the trees and sky, and into the calm, all-forgiving forest.

A notion occurred to me, as I started running again: Why take the same old path to the right, which loops around to the road and back down the driveway home; why not go left this time instead, and see how that choice develops?

It could turn out like one of Naoya's slighter stories, I thought, in which a trivial incident on the subway or in the countryside is described, and left by its author to stand by the wayside, a little Shinto shrine to everyday experience.

I knew the left-hand trail, after all. I'd been that way a couple of times before. Nothing unusual or interesting was going to happen. It would make a story more like the contemporary American kind in which the point is to say that nothing interesting happens.

I decided to take the left fork, and right away hesitated again since the trail was not clear. It was less traveled by deer; it was crooked and somewhat obscured by brush and the undulations of a seasonal creekbed. I looked more closely at the ground. A ragged, foot-deep trench, roughly six feet long and a foot wide, gaped up at me, giving the impression that someone had dug here: a forestry agent, sampling?

Or had some tiny, localized earthquake pulled the ground apart in this one spot? Ridiculous, I know. But this is the effect it had on me. Some cause was to be found somewhere: some blame assigned.

I bent through some overhanging branches and followed a more or less clear passage along the slope to the west. The forest cover thinned, opening ahead to a white, close-hanging sky that was condensing into a sparsely blowing snow. It was here that my opinion of the

uneventfulness of my choice came to be qualified by a sense of the ominous, of the possibility of something beyond my ken looming ahead, ready to precipitate out of the heavy, roiling air.

Around the hump of the hillside the terrain flattened again and I came to a place where a few birch trees had been cut to enlarge a natural clearing. Bits of black plastic poked out from under the sticks and leaves, and I inspected the ground more closely. Little mounds of dug earth appeared around a formation of crude terraced beds. Again I found myself looking into trenches: these deeper and wider than the stream cut, and four or five feet long. A few were covered with a casual lattice of sticks, as if to obscure sight of them from above.

Was this place the source of that sense of foreboding? I knew this to be an old pot plantation—not a graveyard. I could recall that Harah and I had chanced upon it some years previously. And then, for some inexplicable reason, I began to wonder if Harah had ever contemplated suicide. Suddenly I wanted to return home quickly. I was comforted to know that Niki was there, coloring coyotes.

Heading back down the gentle southward slope, I figured I was pointing homeward. I expected to come first to a rocky ridge face and adjoining ravine—the place where thirteen years before, I'd brought my unmanageable dog, Miso, at the end of a chain. My options for dealing with him had come to a dead end. Then for once in his life he'd sat obediently, while I put a rifle to his head. I buried him there and covered the shallow grave with a large heap of leftover cedar shakes. The following autumn I noticed a hole in the side of the mound of wood, making it look like a hut. The grave had been robbed, probably by coyotes.

Making hasty choices on the braided animal trails, I stayed too high and bypassed the homestead. Instead I stayed on the flat ridge, past the now-tranquil scene of another murder: a fresh deer kill, only partially covered in leaves by a cougar. This discovery had come more

recently, in the winter of the previous year. I'd found the carcass still pliable, half-eaten—on a trek that began as a morning stroll down the driveway and detoured through the woods, on a whim. Now, of course, there was nothing, the bones far-scattered. Still my heart beat unsteadily as I came out of the woods on the dirt road by the house of my nearest neighbor. To complete the figure-eight of crossing loops I walked home on the roadway, welcoming the cheery column of smoke I saw rising from the house at its end. I left my psychic agitation behind in the dark woods, drinking in the fresh air and enjoying the live feeling in my limbs.

Supper was ready: corn macaroni, kidney beans, tiny spinach thinnings; Parmesan cheese for sprinkling on top. The three of us held hands until Niki said, "Silence is spooky," and we broke to eat. Harah served herself small portions but I was glad to see her with some appetite again. I told her about my outing, a true tale of "false forks and empty graves." She scraped her fork slowly on her plate as she listened, her cheeks rosy from the bath and yet still gaunt from the sleepless night in Poe's crypts.

When I mentioned the plantation site, her sunken eyes widened. "Oh—I was just thinking about that place earlier today! It's the first time I've thought of it since we were there."

I felt a sudden chill, myself, and tried not to think of my own premonition. "That's pretty eerie. Why were you thinking of it today?"

"After reading all those Poe stories, I was wondering, as I was lying in my bath: If I murdered someone, what would I do with the body? I could take it up in the woods somewhere and bury it; but then, would someone notice the turned-over dirt?"

Niki stopped chewing and put down her fork; she seemed a little shocked at what her mother had said.

I too was taken aback and said to Harah, “What a morbid imagination you have.”

My wife of ten years looked hurt, and lowered her eyes in the manner (I imagined) of a Japanese farm wife; then, unable to eat, she turned her head and looked out the window into the gloomy twilight.

I didn’t know how seriously to take this fantasy of hers. It was totally unlike her, or what I knew of her, to have such thoughts of violence. Maybe it was just the fever, or, as she said, the Poe stories.

“Wanna see the picture I drew today?” Niki broke the uncomfortable silence.

“Sure,” I said, getting up from the table. “Let’s go have a look. You can tell me all about it.”

I didn’t like going down the dark hallway that evening, but it seemed no worse than that brightly lit kitchen with its idle cutlery and brooding, unknown desires.

As I read to Niki I thought of Naoya’s story, the one with the unfaithful husband reading to his son. Niki’s freckled face looked genderless: as it was before the chromosomal die was cast. All a matter of X’s and Y’s: crossroads and forks...

In such a manner did my divided attention wander. Then when we came near the end of our chapter from *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, I heard a faint yelp, a distant, high-pitched keening.

“What’s that?” I said, listening.

My daughter’s eyes shone bright and black as her mother’s.

“Just coyotes,” she said.