

Coyote Nights

Things had been getting better. We were out at a meeting I had to drag my kids to. They resented it of course, but were quiet in the car on the drive home. Probably just too tired to do their usual griping, it was after ten and a school night. As we rounded the corner to our house I saw what I took to be two grey dogs running up the hilly street into the dark, out of my headlights. And then they were gone. It happened so fast I couldn't get it straight in my mind's eye to replay. What was it I saw? Not dogs. Coyotes. Something was funny. There was usually only one of the big ones around, not two, and usually scraggly, brownish. Why did I see grey? I decided to speed up and try to get sight of them again. I hit a pothole and my headlight beams went up and down into the dark, and that's when I saw what the grey fur was. That's when I knew for sure it was what I was hoping it wasn't, hoping it had been incorrectly registered in the dark, in my mind, in that split second. Nicky, our neighbor's little grey poodle, that was the grey I saw dangling between the two coyotes, held by it's throat in their mouths, his legs stiffened into a stunned pose, but still with life in his little eyes.

The coyotes were hightailing it up an embankment now with Nicky hanging, dragging, poking out from between their legs and so I slammed on the brakes and looked to my normally moody and exceptionally tall 14 year old son. He was unusually attentive to the moment, so I took a chance. "You think you can take 'em?" I felt like I was in a Western, but I saw him look carefully and gauge. "I'll try," he said and lurched out of the car. My eleven year old in the back seat started crying and I yelled out the door "Yell something loud at them!" just like it says to do in the magazines. Well, the whole neighborhood told me they heard us later. He yelled words I thought

Coyote Nights

he didn't even know yet, wildly flapping his long arms and stamping his feet. Amazingly, it worked and the large coyotes abruptly dropped the poodle and hauled themselves away up the granite hillside into instant dark cover. But I was worried they'd circle and come back.

Nicky was limping but alive, dripping blood onto the asphalt, and quickly going into shock. I noticed my son was visibly trying to calm himself down from his adrenaline rush so he could approach the dog gently. I could see my son's face in the street lamp; he was very upset. He called Nicky to him in a cracking voice, but the dog was sure my son wanted to hurt him and limped sadly further away from us, up the road. Probably because of all the times my kids had chased Nicky out of our yard, for this was the same dog who had repeatedly dug underneath our back yard fence to get our little Bichon Cindy Lou pregnant. Then when I could get my voice to stop shaking, I called to him myself and the dog surprised me and jumped up into my lap in the car. He even let me put my hand to his neck where the coyote punctures were and then crumpled pitifully on my lap. We yelled toward the neighbor's darkened house to tell them we had Nicky, but no one was home, so we took off down the hill to the 24 Hr. Vet clinic about five miles away. I prayed I wouldn't get us all into an accident while trying to hold Nicky's throat, and that that little grey dog wouldn't die this way. But in the back of my mind were other thoughts. We were saving the life of a dog who belonged to a family who had a son, a grown son, 21, who, just months before, had sold drugs to my thirteen year old son.

When we got to the clinic, we called the neighbor's house. The vet tried, and my son tried. But no one was home. My son. Why was he going outside to use our cell phone to call this family? Me? I couldn't wait to see their faces. Me at the vet, with their dog. When they heard the worried-sounding messages on their voice mail, I wondered if it would cross their

Coyote Nights

minds that I had perhaps done something on purpose to their dog in retaliation. This was going to be one of those special, singular moments in life when you're offered the chance to do something revengeful, or something good, to be kind, or do harm. And I didn't really know which one I wanted to choose. At the moment I couldn't think straight enough to pray, so I just held on and hoped I wouldn't be an asshole.

Gratefully, even doggy emergency rooms take a ridiculous amount of time. Cedars had nothing on this place. It gave me time to consider, consider my son and review the last year. As I looked down I realized I was covered in blood. I asked the attendant if I could get rabies from blood: do coyotes usually carry it, etc.? She looked at me as if I was insane. I wanted to say, That's okay, I am insane. I just saved the life of a creep's dog. Or rather, my son did. She said, No, coyotes don't usually carry rabies, but you can wash up in the back if it's grossing you out.

Walking toward the rear of the building I got a glimpse of Nicky and he was looking a little better even with the tubes now attached to his wounds. I asked the only question I could think of as an apology for invading the vet's space: will Nicky live? The vet was youngish and pretty and you could tell she really wished I wasn't in the operating room, but politely sighed and said Yes. I said Thank you so much I, uh, I'll just go wash up now. She smiled tiredly and turned back to the dog. It would be another forty-five minutes before Nicky's owners would get all our messages and arrive at the hospital. Time enough for me to settle into the numb waiting-room mentality.

The woman and her son eventually screeched up in their new BMW SUV and rushed into the small ante-room. The son looked at me, then at my son, to see if everything was cool. He still didn't know if I had called the

Coyote Nights

cops about his drug business. The mother was crying and excited and so grateful about her dog. She went in the back to see him, and I was left with our three sons. I was very quiet and looked the young man in the eye. "I'm glad your dog's going to be okay." He said, "Oh thank you so much for saving him! Thank you thank you thank you!" I said, "Sure." But I didn't smile. Then the mother came out from the back and I said we were pretty tired and would head on home now and got the hell out of there.

I wanted to put my two sons to bed like it was the old days and they let me. We talked for a while, the younger one wanting to know if Nicky was really going to be okay, the older about if he and the young man and I were cool after all. I tucked both of them in. I said how proud I was of both of them and their bravery and compassion. They did their usual room to room fight over who gets to sleep with which of our two dogs, and then we all fell into a deep sleep. But during the dark of night I went in to check on everyone: when the coyotes start to run on a neighborhood, it's best to make sure your pets cannot somehow get out at night. Especially little dogs or cats. You hear them sometimes late at night losing their lives. It is the saddest sound in the world.

It was nearly four AM when I checked on my youngest all curled in his Ralph Lauren Bear sheets and Star Spangled Banner comforter. Then I watched my older son's handsome sleeping face for a while, now with the beginnings of blonde beard hairs cropping out. He was almost fifteen now. We had had such a hard time the year he was thirteen. It was many a night like this when, unable to sleep with worry, I had come into this room searching for clues for where in the hell he had gotten his drugs, and were there still some hiding somewhere amongst all the baseball equipment I had struggled to pay for. He had been at a sleep-over party at a friend's house when, at 11 PM, the baby-sitter called all the parents and said she

Coyote Nights

had caught the boys smoking pot. She drove my son home and when he walked in the door my heart broke. His eyes were bloodshot and he had a goofy grin. Get to bed! I yelled. Thirteen. Is this supposed to happen? Is this when it's supposed to start? I stared at my sleeping boy that night and I could have choked him, smothered him with the pillow, beat him within an inch of his life.

I was insane with worry that year, starved for information about my boy whom I felt I knew so well. But he had been trained by every bad B movie, every corny TV show on the planet, not to be a snitch, not to tell his mother most certainly. He said his "friend" would get in trouble with "bad" people, mom, really bad people and it wasn't safe to tell. He said he could get hurt. Or maybe they'd even come here and hurt us. He wasn't telling and that was that I could lock him up and throw away the key he wasn't telling. He said if he told I'd do something, he knows it, I'd do something crazy or stupid like call the cops and then who knows what would happen to him and his friends.

I stared at him as he slept for weeks maybe even a month, late at night. Thinking, thinking, trying to figure it out, where could twelve and thirteen year old kids even get dope? One day he'd say the mall, one day he'd say it was down at the local school yard. And then on one more exhausting, sleepless night, I watched as his room filled with beautiful moonlight dancing in from the window and playing across his sleeping sweaty little face. And I suddenly got it. I looked out the window into the bright-as-day moonlit night. I looked at him. I looked out the window. And there, right across the street, was a light on. At two AM. And I saw the black car. And its shiny paint. And the moonlight shining on my son and I knew. It was coming from across the fucking street.

Coyote Nights

I called my neighbor in the morning and said, We have to talk. I think your son is selling my son drugs. She said, No way. I said, Yup, that's what I think. She said, How old is your kid? Seventeen? I said in a tight voice, Thirteen. My kid's only thirteen, he's just tall. She paused and said, Nooo, no way. I said, Okay. I could be wrong. She paused again, then said thoughtfully, It just can't be. Robert's 21. He'd never sell a 13 year old drugs. I said, Just check on it Josey, just check on it. She said, Okay.

At breakfast, while the little one was off brushing his teeth, I said, So I know who's been selling you kids drugs. And it's just across the street. My son's eyes went wide. He said, How do you know? I said, I don't know. Just figured it out I guess. He got really quiet and then said, What are you going to do now? Cause we could get killed or something mom I'm telling you or this guy could get killed! The guys he gets his stuff from are bad asses mom I'm serious! You don't know what you're doing so you can't do anything!! You understand! You can't tell anyone! he was sweating it. What are you going to do now? I chewed the last bite of Raisin Bran extra long, then poured another bowl I wasn't hungry for, hoping for a calming effect. I said, I'm going to think about what to do, that's what I'm going to do. He squirmed in his seat a while, then threw on his backpack and left. I didn't drive him to school anymore since he had gotten so ugly and belligerent that year. He now had to make it in time to catch a city bus. And this morning I was especially glad I had set that boundary with him early in the school year. Glad I had made the mental health decision not to let him be ugly while I drove him around like a chauffeur, especially since now I knew that at least some of his constant bad attitude, his horrid moodiness, was because of the drugs. Grumpy little bastard.

My mind was racing. Once the look on his face had confirmed my suspicions I went into his bedroom and checked the alarm connection on

Coyote Nights

the window. Sure enough, the wires had been cut from the inside. After I pitched a fit for a half hour, and cried, I called all my friends who were mothers of teenagers and asked Well now what the fuck am I supposed to do? When I had calmed down, I called the neighbor again. Hello? Hello Josey. Well, now I'm sure it's coming from your house. Pause. She said, Well not anymore it isn't!! and hung up. That goes down as one of the better conversations of my life.

A year passed with no more trouble. I clamped down on my teenager so hard he squeaked when he walked. It took us to family therapy and a few nasty fights and lots of tears and we both had to learn how to talk to each other without screaming. Screaming was new to my oldest. But he took to it nicely. I read books and prayed a lot, making two steps forward and seemingly six backward on any given day. We eventually forgave each other and began to heal. Trust came slowly, but it came. We had all been through a lot. The divorce. Moving out of our old neighborhood where the kids could come and go in and out of each others' houses like cousins. But we were slowly making our place in the world.

It was midnight one summer night when the doorbell rang. I remember wearing a long nightgown, having stayed up too late playing a treacherous game of Monopoly with my youngest, the money monger. I said Who's there. (Why oh why wasn't I asleep already or out for the evening?) Laura, it's Josey. (Why oh why did I open the door?) She was standing in the doorway in a navy blue nicely cut house dress. Will you take this and keep it for me? (I looked at a case in her hand but it never even crossed my mind to wonder what it was ... was I that sleepy?) Yes okay. She said, Robert will come here to ask you for it. Don't give it to him no matter what. I said Okay, and she left. I put the small black vinyl briefcase in the hallway bathroom. I checked on it every hour. Then I went to my oldest son's room

Coyote Nights

and knocked. Can I ask you a question? Not at all asleep, he said, Yeah. What do you think is in that case? He said, A gun. I said, What!? A gun. What!? I have a gun in my house? The doorbell rang. It was Robert. I told my sons to stay in their rooms. Robert said, Give me my package back. I sweated. No, you'll have to ask your mother for it Robert. She brought it to me, and she'll have to come get it. He said, She doesn't know what she's talking about! My friend is in trouble! If I don't go help him right now something bad could happen to him! Robert, if your mother tells me to give it to you I will. Tell her to call me. Yaul don't know what you're doin'! and he left huffing and puffing. I went to bed. Then I got back up and moved the gun into my bedroom and hid it behind my desk.

The next day I called Josey around 6 or 7 AM. Josey can I ask you a question? Yes. What's in the case? Pause. Laura, it's a gun. I said, Josey. You *cannot* have a gun here! I know Laura, I'm so sorry but I didn't know what else to do. He was leaving with it and put the case on the floor of the kitchen for a minute almost like he wanted me to say something, do something to stop him. And so I grabbed the case and went outside and without even thinking what I was going to do and I started walking and then I thought I'll go to Laura's and I walked up to your door and rang the bell and you took it. I owe you an apology and I swear it will never, ever happen again and you are my savior and thank you! Josey, you need to come get the gun. She said, Of course! and she came right over and took it home and we didn't see each other again around the neighborhood for about six or nine months or so.

Sometimes I forget that part of our history. Sometimes she and I talk about my son's drumming, quickly, outside, as we're leaving for work, and about how there's one neighbor who's threatening to sue me over my kid's loud playing. And she takes my side and we share a laugh and are polite and

Coyote Nights

remain quietly aware of each other's lives as we raise our young, and not so young, sons in Los Angeles. But the memory of that night came rushing back to me today. Today, I was going to have to call Josey again.

I went outside to the carport yesterday to welcome home my youngest from a birthday party, and as I chatted with the artist from around the block who is quite famous for her brilliant sculptures, as my son and her son hopped carelessly out of the van and scraped their DC's against the window of the car and did their best impersonations of jungle men leaping through forests, easily clearing the vehicle without bothering to slide open it's doors, we all heard a loud pop. The other mother and I looked at each other, but it was her son, aged 10, who said it first. Sounded like a gunshot. I said to the mother, Backfire? She shook her head and said, Um, I don't think so. I casually posed, Yeah, you're right, it seemed too high pitched for a backfire. Then another shot rang out. I told my friend I thought I would be getting inside now. She joked, Hey Kyle! Let's go! Better go inside while there's target practice! But I didn't smile and wave good-bye as she pulled away from the curb, and I used my stern don't-challenge-me voice as I told my youngest to get inside the house.

Now what? *Now what?* This isn't drugs. This is a gun. And both my children's windows face across the street. Fixing the alarm won't stop this kind of trouble. I want to make both my children for the rest of their lives sleep in my bedroom, the nee: remodeled garage, nee: remodeled den, now half-way remodeled master bedroom, because it faces the back yard. It doesn't have a bathroom yet, but hell I guess I would let them out to pee. It's the room that's farthest from that neighbor's house. Away from street windows and too-thin California walls for bullets to come flying through. I read about this kind of trouble and unbearable fear in the newspapers every day, but this is Hollywood for God's sake! I want to move. I want to make

Coyote Nights

them move. I want to call the police. I want to marry a policeman. A fireman. A giant. A big scary giant who will go over there and make that boy move to Toledo. Toledo's nice. I hear they have drugs there, too.

Although my fantasies include a wall of solid steel, fifty feet high, I know I'll have to do something. I worked at my desk all this morning, ran an errand and then come home. My eldest is home today with the flu. I make him chicken soup and look out his window. He throws up. I stare at the phone. Around three I went to the kitchen to make the call. Josey? How are you, you sound stressed. Oh I am Laura. The movers are here to put all our things in storage for the remodel and I could scream, I'm not ready for them. I said, Well, would you like some more stress? She says a kindly, Yes. Josey, does Robert still have that gun? I don't know, probably, why? Did he shoot it yesterday, around 3:45 or 4 PM? What? No! I don't think so. Twice, Josey, did he shoot it off twice? Pause. No, he wouldn't, I don't think ... let me ask him Josey! no don't ask him with me on the phone! Just a minute Robert! Did you shoot your gun off yesterday? Silence. Did you!?! Silence. She returns to the phone. Yes, it was him. I'm going to have to have a talk with him. And she hangs up.

I walked out of the kitchen. Why are kids magnets to trouble? My eldest, flu-ridden was standing there, pale. They can't hear you screaming for hours on end to do the laundry or take out the trash, but if you get on the phone on the other end of the house about something deadly, they are in your face like a hungry dog. What's going on, he asks. Nothing, I say. Mom, what's going on? I pause. I don't know if I should tell him or not. I say, Yesterday Robert shot off his gun while your little brother and I were outside. He said, unbelievably, Yeah, two shots. I looked long at him. He had heard them too, sick or not, and hadn't come to me to talk about it at all. Not a mention. Not a word about something so important, so

Coyote Nights

frightening. I couldn't stop looking at his red eyes and sickly posture. Get back to bed, I said. But I wanted to cry with rage and fear, fear, fear. Fear for my number one son. Fear for my number two son. Fear, fear, fear for my beautiful children.

What now? What now?