

Coyotes Christopher Brown

When we hear the pump start going in the tent, I unzip the flap and Jeff's waiting there with his queen-sized air mattress, saying *Hey there's a nice empty spot up for grabs!* Every time we're out here he finds a way to sneak it in when no one's looking, and right in the entrance so that you've gotta stop and marvel at the ingenuity of bringing an inflatable bed and shoving it in the middle of a six-sleeper. All five of us would fit comfortably without it, but he's the expert, right, so no one can really call him on it because Jeff knows how to camp and we don't. Then he just kneels there with that nervous little smile, saying *Better call shotgun!* No one does, though, because Jeff snores.

This is when I decide to fall asleep thinking about the ways I could sabotage his mattress with the Swiss Army knife I borrowed from my little brother: poke it with the scissors or poke it with the short knife or poke it with the slightly longer knife. There's even a pointy one that looks like it's meant for deflating things, that's the one I would use tonight if I were in a more devious mood.

Someone coughs. I roll from my right side to my left because there's not enough space to lay on my back. Then the honk and squeak of Jeff rolling over on his mattress, just to remind us of what we're all missing out on.

"You dick," I say in the smallest voice possible. Fernie giggles beside me.

Jeff rolls again. "What?" he says.

Fernie from beside me: "Molly was just talking in her sleep."

"That must be annoying," says Jeff, "maybe you should just come up here with me?"

Fernie says nothing.

I want to feel bad for Jeff because I think he's just lonely. Bad luck with dating, etc. But it's not like the rest of us have had luck, aside from John and April, both of whom I assume are adorably snuggled up beside Jeff's stupid mattress at the opposite side of the tent. The saddest thing is that I probably *would* hop on his mattress if his snoring wasn't orchestral. I shared a futon with him last summer when we crashed at his friend's place in Saskatoon, and the only sleep I caught was in those few minutes where he might or might not have stopped breathing.

I know a while has gone by, but it's hard to tell how long in a tent after dark. A cricket chirrups, then stops. Fernie is deep breathing and probably asleep. Every breeze rattles the trees and bushes, and the silence that follows is inherently ominous. Then a sound whirrs up from the valley, a faint *woooo-yyyip wooo-yyyip yip-yip-yip*. When no one says anything, I try to ignore it

by focusing on the rhythm of Fernie's respiration. But then the sound grows louder, the *yip-yips* layered like an echo.

"Does anybody hear that?" I whisper. I know Jeff is awake because he isn't snoring yet. I wait, and when he doesn't say anything I say "Jeff?"

Jeff sighs. "That's just coyotes," he whispers back.

I sit straight up in my sleeping bag. "What do you mean coyotes?"

"I mean that's the sound coyotes make."

"But aren't coyotes, like, dogs or something?"

"Pretty much," says Jeff.

"Then why the hell do they sound like that?"

Jeff chuckles a little. "Molly, how have you never heard a coyote before?"

His sass is embarrassing so I hide behind Fernie. It's not my fault I don't have coyotes hanging out in my back yard like some people apparently do. Squirrels and blue jays, sure, but I'm more likely to eat them than they are to eat me. My uncle told me once about a mange coyote on his property that lost all its hair and had to be shot to keep his kids and the chickens safe, but he lives on a farm, so that coyote makes sense.

After a minute I ask: "How many do you think there are?"

"In Saskatchewan?"

"I mean these ones."

I hear Jeff scratch his stubbly cheek. "I don't know, a few by the sounds of it."

"But what's a few?"

Jeff squirms and his mattress squeals. "Are you scared or something?"

"No."

"Well if you are...I mean, there's lots of room up here on the mattress."

"Jeff, godDAMit."

Jeff exhales and I realize he's been holding his breath. He squirms a bit more, feet swishing under his sleeping bag. "Coyotes are harmless," he finally says in a muffle. He's already turned his back is to me.

"Harmless," I repeat. Then, "are you sure?"

They're like foxes but bigger, this is a fact I'm moderately certain of. They eat small things like mice and whatever. And even if they're mange, then what? A bunch of bald Border Collies aren't much to be afraid of.

Jeff starts to snore. Loud enough, at first, to drown out the coyotes. I realize, though, that in the pause at the bottom of every breath I can still hear them, louder and louder and louder.

"Jeff?" I whisper. He snores in response.

Waooo-wooooooooooyip!

I start to imagine them roving between the trees. They smell our site and the food we left out like idiots. There aren't bears down here but the assholes at the park entrance should've told us about the coyotes. Ten of them, twenty of them, noses to the dirt. Yipping and howling all the way to our flimsy little tent. Some of them are huge, man-eaters, bigger than wolves, foaming from the mouth all over our chairs and the picnic blanket and the cooler, killing the near-empty beers we left by the fire, drunk now with hunger *and* alcohol, drunk with rage too because they've seen the way we treat this place, pissing in the trees and leaving trash all over and basically being just all around shits.

Then the leader hushes them: Behold the human steaks, neatly packed in nylon wrapping! They fall into formation, staggered rows of three or four on all sides of the tent. A sneak attack. The wind drops dead, the crickets scatter. Quiet now. Coyotes a tip-toeing oh-so-quietly, ready to make their move.

Suddenly Jeff's air mattress becomes a viable option. Just shimmy over Fernie and Peter and into the protective range of Jeff's sonorous growls. Step on people's feet, who cares? We can all die together.

I slide to the foot of the tent, but before I can climb over my friends, my fingers find a backpack. *My* backpack, with all of my essentials, toothbrush, compact mirror, nail clippers, spiced rum—but inside, the most essential thing of all: red, cold, full of capabilities.

I hug my brother's Swiss Army knife and listen. The swish of trees in the wind, the trill of crickets, and the pervasive snores of Jeff. Everyone's nestled in and I'm here at the door with a weapon in my hand. I should just make my way back to my pillow, but looking at them all sleeping there, defenseless, I feel almost responsible. If the coyotes are still out there, and I'm the

only one awake—if I'm the only one awake, I should probably check, at the very least. Since I'm up here at the door anyway.

My mom always says *hope for the best but imagine the worst*, so that's what I do: I imagine a pair of yellow eyes in the dark, and every time they blink they disappear, and every time they reappear they're closer. I unfold the longest blade and reach for the zipper, and my heart's going wacky in my chest when I zip the door open and lean forward to look outside.

“What are you doing?” Jeff says from behind me, and I almost jump out of my skin.

“Jesus, Jeff, nothing,” I spit, “I'm going to the bathroom.” I'm annoyed enough that for a second I'm not afraid to look outside, so that's what I do. First there's nothing but darkness, but then my eyes adjust and I can make out some trees and the picnic table and a chair. And then I can see pretty much everything.

The knife is still in my hand when I stand to leave, and that's when I decide it was meant for the mattress all along.

Christopher Brown is pursuing his PhD in a city of magpies. In 2018, he was selected for the RBC Taylor Prize's inaugural Emerging Writers program in non-fiction. His most recent work can be found in *The Feathertale Review* and *AntiLang*.