

There was a story told to all the little girls I knew—we never quite could pin down who was the first to tell it, or the first to hear it, and we could never quite figure out what the story was meant to tell us. All we heard from our Aunties and Mothers and Grannies was this:

*Coyote is overjoyed to learn that his eldest son is going to take a bride. He prepares a potlatch, seven courses of feasting. He brings in all the greatest dancers he knows from all the tribes. He prays to the ancestors that his son will have all the children he desires. And then he meets his son's wife-to-be, a young girl of immense beauty and not much brains.*

*Coyote decides to seduce his son's woman. On the eve of their wedding, Coyote calls to his son and says "Son, see up upon that tree?"*

*His son looks to the top of a towering tree and sees a beautiful bird, one too lovely to be of this world. He looks to his father and nods. Coyote says to him "Son, I wish you to climb to the top of that tree and bring me down that bird so this old man can have a memento of the other world."*

*Coyote's son diligently started to climb the strong young tree, figuring it to be no more than thirty feet high where the bird is. He climbs to the thirty feet, reaches his hand out for the bird, and sees it another ten feet above. He climbs the next ten feet, and again finds the bird beyond his reach. Once more, another ten feet, another disappointment, on and on.*

*As his son laboured, pine-sticky hands always reaching for one more branch, Coyote pulled back the ancient folds of his wrinkled skin and bound it tight with leather strips behind his head, showing the world a face that was as like his young son's as his own.*

*He went to the home of his soon-to-be-daughter-in-law and stood before her, as like his son as two peas in a pod. She looks at him and takes his hand, smiling her lovely smile as she would to her husband to be.*

*In some endings told to us, her husband climbs down the tree and saves her from his father. Sometimes he realizes his father's treachery before it's too late. Sometimes he doesn't realize it before he climbs as high as the moon, where the woman who bore Raven tells him of another tricksters scheme. Sometimes he doesn't realize at all and keeps climbing.*

My grandma would never tell me which ending was true.

*"I never knew much about the devil until I met him."*

This was the famous beginning to Nookomis' famous story. She would be sitting at her scarred wooden kitchen table, her hair in two braids, rolling a cigarette. She'd start the story as she sprinkled tobacco into a rolling paper, and at the end of that first sentence she would lick the glue at the join and light it up. I would be watching her, opening a can of mushroom soup to dump onto the pork chops we would be making for dinner, but when I heard those words I would hurry to get them in the oven so I could sit down and listen.

She was pretty, my grandma- pretty enough to be a thing of legend. What she called her “youthful foolishness” was, to me, a bravery that became a fairytale. She was sixteen when she met my grandpa, a twenty-one year old Ojibwe boy with dark eyes and an ill-reputed family. Small town lore said that my grandpa was the descendant of Coyote, and when you met his father you would be hard pressed not to agree. A wrinkly old man, his laugh-lines falling so thickly they pushed the folds of his yellow-brown eyes down and out, and his mouth in and up; the only photo I had of him seemed to suggest a man halfway through the transformation from man to beast.

“I met yer grandpa when I was just a little thing- I was something to look at at the time, all blonde hair and white skin, and those injuns on the prowl, well- they sure noticed. My stepma, she would beat me near an inch of my life if she noticed me makin’ eyes at them. Called ‘em savages, told me about white girls dragged off and raped. Now, you remember yer granpa; the man could hardly look me in the eyes after fifty years of marriage, and that was nothin’ to what he was as a boy.

“His pa however- I met him first time when I was up to bring my sweetie some soft rolls I had made. Jackie wasn’t around for the first time when I come up to the door, bag of rolls in hand. Instead there’s this old man- as wrinkled an’ brown as any I’ve seen, but such queer rotten squash eyes as you’d never forget. Yellow brown they was, as as full of wickedness an’ sweetness as to be near brimmin’ with them.”

I would cover her paper thin-paper pale hand with my brown paw as her own eyes, once clear and blue; now misty and grey with blindness and remembrances, saw through the fog that now surrounded her to years long gone, when the world was still writing today’s stories.

“People had seen him change from man to coyote, they said, and I remembered that as I stood in the door, him hollerin’ for me to come through. Jackie’s Auntie, the only family member he’d seen fit to introducing to me, told me about Coyote. How he was to them what the devil might be like to us, only not as set in his evil ways. Said he was more looking for fun in any form and ended up finding the madness and cruelty in all situations, despite his intentions.

“My stepma always told me that the devil would be attractive, and poor Jackie’s pa’s eyes looked like they spoke to ye of an adventure the moment you met ‘em.

“But that’s not the story then, is it?

“Me an’ my Jack was married the year I was seventeen. The bruises had barely faded from the beating I got saying I was to marry an injun when I pulled myself into the dress I had remade from my old blue muslin. I remember walking all the way up the path to his house- he lived with his two Aunties and his pa, way up the side of the hill, and I was puffin’ by the time I reached there.

“I remember his Auntie, his favourite Auntie, the one who had no problem with me comin’ in with my whiteness and my spoiled, soft hands, tellin’ me that my man had to run an errand for his pa, but he would surely be back in time for us to be wed. Me and her sat for near enough an hour, when he’d told me to call by around noon, and there I’d been early. Finally, there he came, crawling out from behind a tree so tall it made you dizzy to look up at it. And I smiled at him, I smiled into those eyes that had belonged to me, had been promised to me.

“And I smiled into those eyes all the while, until it was that they flashed that yellow brown. And I swear to you, them eyes was the only thing that could have told the two of them apart. And when I seen them eyes flash, something just broke in me. This wasn’t my Jackie, my sweetie—this was something else, someone I hadn’t given myself to.”

Here she would stop and tell me to check on the pork chops in the oven, or the bannock on the stove, and for God’s sake to set the table. When I had completed all my chores and sat down again, she would smile.

“My Jackie came down the tree to see me biting into the devil—no matter what he’d been called, to me at that moment, he was the devil. My nails seemed to turn to claws as I scratched, pulled his wrinkled flesh from where he’d tied it back, my teeth feeling fur as I bit into him, though the remnants I spat to the ground showed only flesh. But I know what I felt, and when I saw Jack, I went back to me. But my Jackie, he changed.”

“And was he in time?” I would always ask, breathless by the end no matter how many times she told it. And my Nookum, her beautiful delicate face alight, would always tell me-

“And I married my Jackie.”

And so through the years, every time I caught sight of myself in the mirror and saw my eyes shift, black to yellow-brown, I said it was my Nookom and the animal released inside her the moment she fought off Coyote, the Devil, my grandfather. Whenever I felt that animal bloodlust rise up like bile in the back of my throat when I was called a *breed* it was my grandma’s protective influence, not the predatory instincts of my half-animal lineage.

I remember the last time my Nookom told me this story, and I remember the moment they told me she had died. I remember the brown draining from my eyes as my sorrow overtook me, and my coyote eyes coming in. I heard the howl of human anguish turning to the animal scream of triumph as I found who my grandfather had truly been; I saw my furry paw take a step to the spirit world, where I began the search for the woman who had tempted the devil, been too foolish to say no, and too wise to admit it.