

The River, The Corn And The Coyote

At the end of a long and dusty road, where mongrel dogs scavenged and sun-dried old men rocked and nodded in the noonday heat, Rafael Dominguez stood in the doorway of his small hut wiping sweat from his brow and squinting into the heavens. There was not a cloud in the sky, nor had there been for many weeks, and the well he had helped two men from the village dig last year had stopped giving. Even the river had gradually grown narrower, thinned to a small stream, then, with time, had simply vanished.

Before the river had begun to die, Rafael Dominguez had planted a patch of corn behind the small hut where he and his wife, Conchita and their two children, Paulo and Esmeralda lived. Each day, with Paulo at his side, he would don his straw hat and walk two miles to the river with a tree branch slung over his thin shoulders, his bare feet made hard and leathery by the hot, sandy soil along the way. The branch had two wooden buckets tied to it with pieces of sturdy twine Conchita had woven especially for the occasion.

One bucket of water was for his family, the other for the corn. Most days, Rafael Dominguez and his son would make the trip at least three times, and they would celebrate their good fortune by washing their faces and necks in the warm, cloudy liquid, after which he would carefully spread the used water over the crowded rows of the green, young corn.

“We must be careful,” he would always tell Paulo each day as they tended to the thin, green plants. “The water is as precious to our corn as it is to us, Paulo. And our corn is as precious to us as we are to it.”

“How are we precious to the corn, Papa?” Paulo would always ask.

Rafael Dominguez would smile patiently at his son.

“Because, Paulo,” he would say, “Without the rains, the corn cannot find water for itself. We are precious to the corn because it depends on us to bring it the water it needs to grow strong.”

“And we need the corn to grow strong, right, Papa?”

“You are a smart boy, Paulo, ” he would repeat tenderly.

At this moment Rafael Dominguez was angered: the rains had not come for months. He spoke not a single word about his reason for being angry to his young son; it was not a matter such a little boy should need to understand. Even, he felt, one as smart as Paulo.

That evening, as they sat down together for the meal of tortillas and beans Conchita had prepared, Rafael Dominguez thanked God and asked for His blessing on their food, but held back his usual plea for the rains. He would need to make confession to Father Alberto for what he had been thinking about. He could not bring himself to talk about it, even with Conchita as they lay together in the dark before sleep came.

Nights were often a time when Rafael Dominguez would awaken suddenly, then listen closely for the familiar sounds to come again. This night, as on many nights, in the moonlight shining through the window, he could see the children sleeping quietly on their bed, and he could hear Conchita's soft breathing next to him.

There it was, again. The sound of a coyote, long and wailing in the darkness. When he moved to the window, he saw the coyote's thin shadow as it stood near the old saguaro cactus that had stood for time eternal on a hill overlooking the village. He stepped carefully over Conchita and the children, closed the decrepit, wood door quietly behind him, then walked down the path he and others had worn with their feet and sandals over the years that led to the banks of the river.

“This is where I will make my confession,” Rafael Dominguez spoke softly. “No priest; only God will hear my words tonight.”

He stared silently across the riverbed, now dry and creased like an old tia's face. Under the glow of the moon a coyote ran to the edge of the dead river and stopped. It stepped further into the dry bed, sniffed the air, and then turned away as if puzzled. The ritual continued until the coyote had reached the center of the riverbed, where it sniffed once again, then turned and ran back up the riverbank nearby

and howled.

“You, too, are wondering what kind of tricks God is playing on us,” Rafael Dominguez said in a grim, low voice.

At the top of the riverbank the coyote's eyes reflected the pale light and it turned and ran a few yards, then turned to look back at him. The animal looked parched: its fur was falling out in large patches around its neck and back and haunches, and both of its ears were split in several places.

“Tonight,” Rafael Dominguez said, “you will be my confessor, and I, yours. And before this night is over, you and I must clear up a few things.”

As if in agreement, the coyote barked a couple times, yipped at the sky, then ran a few feet closer. It sat with its tongue lolling out and flicked at its ear with a hind paw, then chewed vigorously at the paw for a few moments, seeking out some unseen devil.

“There are three things a man and his family need,” Rafael Dominguez stated, raising a finger for emphasis. “Some people think money is the most important need, but we know this to be untrue, for money brings with it great sorrow.”

Deep in thought for a moment, he rubbed at his aching shoulders and stared at the coyote, then spoke once again.

“Food, shelter and water, without question, are the most important. Without water, we will perish much quicker than without food or shelter.”

Rafael Dominguez stooped and picked up a stick, then began drawing in the dry sand of the riverbed. He first drew a circle, divided it into three equal parts, then pointed the stick at the coyote, which had tilted its head and was listening curiously to his speech making.

“Father Alberto tells us that the circle represents God,” he lectured, circling the stick around the drawing. “Each section represents one of those things, such as water, food or shelter.”