

EVANGELINE JONES

HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

THE FIRST DAY I saw the coyotes, Mason advised me to take a gun. “What kind of gun?” I wanted to know. Not that I knew anything about guns, beyond a vague understanding of the differences between a handgun, a rifle, and an AK-47. My personal experience of wielding a weapon was limited to the time I’d played paintball as a teenager, fumbling from behind odd-shaped barriers to aim—mostly inaccurately—at my opponents. Oh, and then there was the one time I’d played the arcade game where you shoot lasers at dinosaurs; I hadn’t been particularly successful at that one, either. Mason nodded his stubbly chin toward a rifle in the corner, leaning up against the cedar-framed door. I eyed its long barrel with skepticism.

“There are lots of wild animals out there,” he warned, shifting his hefty weight from side to side. Mason had diabetes, and it was only since

I’d arrived at his northern Idaho property two weeks earlier that he’d started eating better. I was there as part of a work-exchange program, helping him start seedlings for his garden, but it would be months before the butter lettuce flourished, and in the meantime, I refused to subsist on frozen steak and potatoes. I made grocery lists and dispatched him to Walmart; he returned laden with tomatoes, peppers, onions, carrots, and other healthier provisions. Like a good, much younger pseudo-wife, I prepared three meals a day and cleaned the three-story house we shared with our two cats. Diet wasn’t the only area in which we didn’t see eye-to-eye; when he’d spent too long in his room, working himself up over YouTube videos and slumping into the kitchen to lament the dangers of the Mandela Effect, I’d brew him peppermint tea and assure him that the world was less antagonistic than it appeared. He’d narrow his eyes at me in suspicion—the very same way, in fact, that I was now regarding his rifle.

“I’m pretty sure that if I took that thing with me, I’d be in more danger than any animal,” I said. Mason shook his head, heavy with disappointment. He knew that there were wolves out there, traversing his forty acres of forests and ponds. He knew there were coyotes—heck, everyone knew it. After all, they’d been killing the two-month-old broiler chickens that the caretaker family—a conservative Christian couple with a teenage daughter and three adopted youngsters—were raising down below the house. Those chickens, encased in barbed wire and income expectations, were not easy to protect; the other day, the family’d shot down a razor-beaked osprey. And who knew what else was out there roaming around in the forest. Bears? Unhinged forest-dwellers escaping the apocalypse? Yetis?

Regardless, I left the house unarmed, making my way up the dirt road that carved its way through Douglas Firs and Lodgepole Pines. Past the clearings where Mason and I had dragged withered brush from beneath the trees to burn it in a gasoline-drenched blaze, past the swampy pond where dragonflies gathered on reedy grasses to tint their wings with sun. My breath crescendoed as I summited a hill, and I paused to allow it to settle, sipping water and gazing out over a field speckled with wildflowers. That’s when I saw them: three autumn-colored balls of fur, somersaulting in the grass. I held my newly recovered breath, watching

in amazement. Foxes? No, their noses were too narrow. Coyotes! Baby coyotes. They chased one another in an imitation of kindergartners playing tag, until they froze, and—taking notice of my presence—high-tailed it into the gaping mouth of a nearby drainpipe.

My first thought was: *They must be living there.* The second was: *I can't tell anybody on the property about this. Ever.*

That resolution didn't last long. Perhaps it was the arrogance of witnessing something unique—*the coyotes revealed themselves to me!* Or the desire to concretize experience by sharing it, the need to validate one's existence. Or the way that observing creatures in their natural habitat creeps its way into one's heart, heats it, and spreads outward, like lava—beautiful, dangerous, appealing. I grasped at the justification to reveal my discovery later that evening, while returning from a neighbor's house with Mason in his Ford pickup. As we competed with a white-capped river to rush past trees that blurred into Hunter Green, he reflected on the osprey his caretakers had killed, hands gripping the wheel. "I don't agree with shooting animals just because they're predators," he said. Occasionally, Mason would go off on a rant like this, the way we all do when passions bubble to the surface and insist on expression. The stunning creature had lain there in a majestic display of ivory and gold, ornamental in its lifelessness. "Like the coyotes. The caretakers think it's a family; they want to find them and kill them all. But they're just living their lives, just being themselves. They haven't done anything wrong."

This is it, my arrogance said. Your opportunity to tell the world. I opened my mouth, and lava spewed out. "Actually, I saw the coyotes today," I boasted, ignoring the pressure in my chest, confirming that I spoke in error.

Mason's jaw clenched. "What?" he bellowed. "Where? You have to tell them!"

"But ... you just said ..."

"You have to tell them," Mason reiterated, focused with determination on the road ahead. "They've killed dozens of chickens! Who knows how many more they might get."

I stared silently out at the diminishing sunlight, the way it flickered off the windshield and announced the coming darkness. Like most women, I was conditioned to please. When people—particularly burly men—

raised their voices at me, my tendency had always been to withdraw, to hide, to placate and retreat. But like most women, I'd always had an easier time standing up for others than myself. Especially babies. The coyotes were innocent—anybody who'd witnessed their playful tumbling would agree. They were killers, sure, but that was their nature. It wasn't mine, no matter how intensely my palpitating nervous system demanded an override. "I can't do it," I said finally, choking on my own volcanic pride. "If you find the coyotes on your own and decide to kill them, that's up to you. But I can't be part of it."

Mason shook his head, his disappointment even weightier this time—so dense it threatened to drag us both down. "I guess that's your decision," he said. "But the family's not going to like it."

The caretakers' daughter paid me a visit the following afternoon. Amanda was nineteen and beautiful in the simple, homegrown way of God-fearing Christians who live off of the land. Makeup-free, with wheat-colored hair cascading down her back, her clear-eyed sincerity reminded me of myself when I was not much younger, and still believed in a single, rule-based approach to existence, one in which good and evil are clearly delineated. Unsurprisingly, Amanda's main concern was for my soul. "Do you believe in God?" she wanted to know.

I transplanted a frail tomato plant into a larger pot, pondering where it came from and whether it would survive. "I believe in a larger, creative force," I tried to explain. "But I don't think that it's Christian, or belongs to any one religion."

Amanda's well-formed eyebrows furrowed in dismay. In her estimation, my soul was in grave danger, worse off than the coyotes. Maybe even worse off than the chickens. "The Bible says that we have dominion over the animals," she tried again. "Don't you believe that we have to make our decisions based on God's word?"

"I don't think we can look to texts for those kinds of answers," I said. "Even religious texts—at least not on a surface level. I think we have to listen to what's right for us, in our hearts."

That was almost too much for Amanda. "So you just do whatever you want? Whatever you decide you want to do, and say it's right?"

I returned to the budding leaves in front of me, the tomatoes and the butter lettuce and the zucchini. How could I tell this clear-eyed young woman that the way they'd sprouted from a mere seed—a miraculous

event even to me, the one who'd planted them—could never be fully explained? Not by science, not by religion, and certainly not by me. That larger questions, such as dominion over the animals, were exponentially veiled in gray. That I knew how it felt to follow my heart, and I knew how it felt to ignore it. That I'd experienced the consequences of its dismissal, and they were much more serious than the death of chickens or coyotes—they were a direct injury to the creative force itself.

I tried and once again I failed. "We'll find them anyway," Amanda assured me.

During my time there, at least, her prediction never came true.

THE SECOND DAY I saw the coyotes came shortly before I left Mason's home for my next destination: a B&B even further north, near the Canadian border. Amanda's father, determined to locate the vermin himself, had been patrolling the property, rifle to shoulder; each evening, he returned empty handed. One afternoon, at Amanda's suggestion, the two of us hiked the perimeter. While our route maintained a safe distance from the drainpipe, a subterranean part of me wondered at her motive. So when I again summited the hill to that grassy expanse to see the young coyotes frolicking, a peace descended over me, a knowing that I'd made the right choice. One leapt on top of the other, nipping at its ear; a third, alert to my presence, met my eyes before all three scurried back into their hideout. At intervals, they would peek their long brown noses out to see if I was still there, waiting for the danger to pass so they could resume their play. Yet I couldn't shake the sense that they trusted me on some level, that they knew their secret was safe. It nearly hadn't been, but it was.

That sense of knowing never left me—not even on my final day at Mason's. I'd packed my minimal belongings, along with my cat's substantial trappings, into my silver Honda Civic. As we strolled across the lush grounds to the caretakers' house to bid them farewell, Mason paused near the lake-like pond where a Canadian goose and its mate had come to rest. Then he stopped.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

He scuffed the sandy soil with one boot, looking unusually sheepish for a fifty-three-year-old man. I hoped that he would continue to eat well after I left. I hoped he wouldn't watch too many conspiracy theory

videos on YouTube. That he'd get another work-exchange resident, that he wouldn't stay alone with his thoughts in that expansive house. "Last night, the coyotes killed forty chickens," Mason said. I drew a long breath. I wanted to feel upset, or angry on the caretakers' behalf, but instead, an unexpected pride engulfed me. In response, I simply nodded.

The caretakers saw me off with true Christian kindness—warm embraces, handmade gifts. They made no mention of chickens, or coyotes. But it was there, nonetheless: the proverbial elephant, finally taking up the space where it belonged. ♦