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Jon Remmerde

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Raven and Coyote

Her name is Raven. She is almost sixteen. Her shiny black hair hangs freely to her shoulders. She is Raven.

Her father is Coyote, the trickster Native Americans know. He has become a modern man in the industrial culture, in the consumer culture, in the modern, world-destroying culture. He had been Coyote, but he left his identity behind him and entered the modern world, perhaps to survive. Culture-destroying changes, people-destroying changes had come to the land, and even his power as the progenitor of his species did him no good at forestalling change. He left his coyoteness so thoroughly behind, it faded from his memory, as he meant it to. What would be the greatest trick the trickster could play? to trick himself, to fool everyone about who he was, even himself.

Raven is thief and sage, who understands more than she speaks of, who is black in raven form, but iridescent green, silver, changing according to the way the light changes.

She is child, human child, full of wonder, growing toward Raven.

Stimulated by memory of his history that never quite entered his conscious thoughts, Coyote studied cultures rendered asunder by the modern world. In all cultures, as they attempted to modernize, he saw the loss of their center, of their religious force, of family cohesion.

He said, "Modern culture calls itself rational, scientific, electrical, mechanical. The non rational, the meaning of all mythology, and all religion is disproved, scientists say. The people believe what scientists tell them. Even the people who hold onto some sense of religion put their religion into a special time and place, where it won't interfere with their material survival.

"Physical force is evident to the five senses, so people believe in physical force, and they believe only in the material world. Except, certain abstractions from material existence assume religious importance, wealth, political power, fame, power over others.

"All religious practice and observance comes second. Material survival comes first, material wealth, the new religion of the masses."

She understood most of what he said, though her experience was not broad. She understood what he said about initiation rites, because she read widely, avidly, and her reading about other cultures and religions informed her about what he talked about.

He said, "The modern culture killed all minor gods, the gods of weather, the gods of war, the gods of the hunt and the harvest. The people disowned the major God, the Great Spirit, the Creator and Master of the Universe, as irrelevant to the modern world. Along with the bath water of superstition, the scientific, rational culture threw out the baby of human needs that cannot be fulfilled by material means, by scientific and rational explanation. It threw out the bathtub and plumbing, all the symbolic, mythological systems of learning and support among nations, tribes, and families. It threw out all connection to sources of water for future baths. It threw out the means to fulfill the human need to worship, to revere and emulate the powerful, positive force of creation in a sensible fashion, to have positive, numinous order and sensibility in human lives, to reflect and understand order and sensibility in the structure and operation of the universe."

She understood that violence and disorder come to the world because human needs are not fulfilled. People lack food. Violence augmented by modern weapons uproots people from their homes and homelands. Even people who have food and shelter lose the symbolic, mythological systems of learning within and among the tribes that knit together humankind in a sensible and orderly universe.

She wanted initiation rites as she became a mature woman. One can start a revolution in understanding. One can achieve order in the midst of disorder. One can establish a beginning. She began to prepare herself before she knew what she would do. By seeing and revering the mystery of life, of all natural forces around her, she declared order.

She read. When she was quite young, she tried the schools that most other children attend. She found little possibility for education there. Business necessary to conduct humankind's everyday material world comprised the largest part of the knowledge the schools tried to make the children understand. She found little of mystery, mythology and life taught there and little that led to understanding, compassion, and reverence.

She found it difficult to be among people who had little sense of human history, of their own insignificance in the midst of billions, and yet of their significance as one, one human, one

moment in time, one link in the flow of life, existence and meaning.

After her brief time in school, she pursued a diverse education. She studied “subjects,” geography, history, mathematics, science, with her mother and father as teachers when she needed teachers. She read many books not classifiable under “subjects.”

She walked with family and friends, and she walked alone in meadows, in forests, high in the mountains amongst basalt and granite rock formations near their home, along rivers and streams and ponds and lakes.

She saw a father elk in the lower meadow. The elk saw her. She walked slowly down from the dirt road to the meadow. She lay down and rolled under the barbed wire fence. With his massive antlers spread above him, dark against the mountain blue sky, the big animal watched her stand up and walk closer to him.

He tore away lush clover and chewed it. She smelled the morning, the father elk’s rich, animal smells, clover, grass, all life on the meadow. When she walked to within ten arms’ lengths, the huge animal began to match her steps by steps away from her. She wondered if he moved away because, after all, she was human, or if he moved away because she was simply other.

The father elk, brown, tan, grey, black and golden, munched clover. Explanation of everything the father elk was in material terms didn’t touch the majesty Raven sensed in him, the intelligence she sensed in him that let him know she would bring him no harm, that insured her safety in this huge beast’s territory.

She walked along the top of the ridge where ancient ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, and white fir trees grew. Low ground cover of juniper bushes and small juniper trees, and yellow and blue and orange wildflowers, and several kinds of grasses grew, north and west of the house. A hundred smells of meadow, forest, and mountain blew in the wind. Raven’s black hair and her thoughts blew in cool, brisk wind.

A bear frequently traveled this trail. Raven had seen scat and tracks. She heard the bear, upwind from her, moving toward her with no attempt to move quietly, noisy feet through dead limbs beneath trees and snuffling sound of deep breathing.

When the black bear, shading to grey, came into view through the trees, Raven said, “Greetings, Bear.” She did not want to surprise her. Beyond middle age, large and powerful,

the bear stopped, rose to her hind legs and looked Raven over.

She said, "It's me. Raven." The bear dropped to all fours again and walked past her, just more than an arm's reach away. Once past, she rose to her hind feet again, smelled all the odors on the wind, looked Raven over carefully, then said "whuff" in a friendly greeting to this human who would be Raven, kin in the wild world, and went on her unhurried way into the forest, across the face of the earth.

Raven didn't try to explain her own intelligence or its sources in material terms, and there was no explanation, in terms those of the material world of five senses would understand, for her certainty that everything was touched, organized, held cohesive by intelligence that transcended the bluebird, the elk, the bear, her, and knit all life together into a sensible, harmonious whole.

Coyote was her father. She studied her mother and wondered who she was. Sometimes she seemed Crane, majestic and yet gangling, graceful in flight and striding, yet clumsy gaining the air, a creature of three elements, air and earth and water.

Her parents trusted her to be safe in all her explorations. They trusted her surroundings to be safe for her. They trusted bears, elk, eagles, rattlesnakes, thunder and lightning and wind, water and mountains and stone ridges to think of her safety.

Sometimes she thought Coyote understood she was Raven. Sometimes she didn't know. She knew it wasn't time yet to discuss it.

It was time to learn. In less than a hundred years, the buffalo were gone, the plains as they had been created by Wakan Tanka, the Great Spirit, God, The Life Force, were destroyed. Earth's rivers ran with pollution. Modern man defined everything in material terms and then set about to destroy it. Modern man had no reverence for life, no understanding of the teachings that mythology made available. Places of wilderness dwindled. When she thought about these processes of history, her heart dwindled, the spirit within her dwindled, and she had to work hard to regain her sense of meaning and direction.

Despite his objections to the lack of initiation rites in the modern culture, Coyote gave her nothing that would serve. Originally, when he said, "rites," she thought he said "rights," and she still thought of her right to the rites. She began to know that he had only history to give her, knowledge about what had been, despair at what could be but was not. She held to hope.

She held to her confidence that she would find a way through the appearances of chaos around her.

He had no rites to give her for initiation. He was too Coyote to attempt anything untrue to the underlying mythology that had served a hundred cultures over thousands of years. But he was too modern to attempt to reinstall rites dead for twenty years, fifty years, a century. He had never been the giver of rites, but he was the trickster, the one who shook and jested at the accepted forms, that they might fall asunder or settle more firmly into place, proven.

He tried to change roles, to fulfill his duty as parent by fulfilling her need.

She saw the pain in him as he split himself into warring parts. She said, "I'm designing my own ceremonies for initiation. Nobody can give me ceremonies that will work, because what I do will grow out of everything I've learned in fifteen, almost sixteen years. I'm the only one who knows what I've learned."

Relief mixed with disappointment and regret in his reaction. He said, "Oh, well, I thought..." and he seemed unable to say anything else.

She said, "I will need your help with some of the ceremonies. I just want to design them myself."

His disappointment cleared. She thought of talking to him about what caused his sense of conflict, but she thought it was not yet time. Once initiated into adulthood, assuming her full identity as Raven, her words would have weight they lacked from her as a juvenile.

She took her sleeping bag, a ground cover, and food and water, and she stayed at the top of the ridge northwest of the house four days and nights. Coyote said, "I'll check on you once in a while up there."

She said, "No, I don't want you to do that."

"Indian youths coming into adulthood had mentors from the tribe in attendance, checking on them frequently."

"I'm not going to be fasting or going through physical deprivation, so I don't require tending. The point of what I'm doing is solitude to achieve deeper contemplation. I want it to be a time away from the modern world, so being checked on won't fit into what I'm doing. I'm not copying the Native American rituals. I'm designing new what will work for me."

But she was checked on. Eagle flew down from higher on the mountain the first day and twice every day after that. She sat in the top of a juniper tree just three trees away from

Raven's bed, where Raven sat, being still and praying. Eagle observed but didn't intrude, then flew away into the day. Owl came at night on silent wings. Raven only knew Owl was there because she saw her silhouette, a dark shadow against the lighter sky.

Late in the afternoon of the second day, the biggest rattlesnake she had ever seen, beautiful shades of green and yellow, with bright yellow eyes, came from the rocks above her bed into the open sunshine and watched her from a few feet away.

As with the eagle and the owl, Raven knew there was no need for conversation. All of them understood her ceremony, and brought as gifts their quiet participation in what she was doing, then left the position of watcher, giver of knowledge of life, open for the next to come, a young deer one morning, a badger, a skunk, hawks in the blue sky above her, where small white clouds hurried from horizon to horizon. Smaller birds that lived closer to the ground flew around her and then perched in low bushes nearby.

When Raven returned to her house after four days, she knew what Coyote and Crane had given her, though they had not given her rites. They had given her opportunity. They had given her the freedom of her curiosity, and they had given her help in satisfying her curiosity without attempting to limit what she would learn and what she would become. They had given her almost nothing material, but this intangible openness, they had given.

Freedom, support, and help in defending her freedom from humankind's definitions coming from all around her had been essential in the rites that worked well for her now.

She dreamed. She saw visions. Dreams and visions told her she was and would be Raven. She did not yet fully understand, but she prepared.

She needed to build an image. She looked for materials. In the shop, she found a pile of cardboard. She said, "Dad, what is all this cardboard for?"

"Nothing. I'm going to take it to the recycling center when I get to it."

"Could I use some of it?"

"Sure."

"Do you have black paint and a sharp knife?"

She visualized what she wanted. Without drawing on the cardboard, she cut. Then she bent the cardboard and folded it and glued and painted most of it black, and she had the head

and shoulders of a raven. The raven's bill was more than two feet long, but still, it looked very much like a raven. She put it on, head and shoulders over her head and shoulders, and she saw out through the open bill.

She thought of animal hides and heads aboriginals had worn when they acted the parts of animals in ceremonies. She didn't want the real head and hide, because she didn't want a raven to die. She had no mirror, but she saw herself clearly, as if she stood ten feet away and looked at herself. Despite the disproportionate size of what she had made, she looked very raven-like.

Coyote was stunned. Raven stood just outside the shop. What she had built was only cardboard and paint and glue and tape, but she far transcended the materials she had used. She really did look like Raven.

Again he was torn in different directions. She was only sixteen. He was her father, and he wanted to hold her and protect her. Yet, he knew all her life had aimed toward womanhood and independence, toward this moment. Her focus on mythology of human existence, on heights of spiritual meaning called to depths he had been able to keep capped, out of his consciousness, for more years than he could remember.

For a long time, her work parallel to Native American mythology had nudged and pried at what he had kept successfully below the surface, until symbols and hints of knowledge surfaced in his dreams. He let his dreams fade into unconsciousness in the morning light, and the symbols and knowledge began to surface in his daily existence.

In the mirror, he saw images of himself as wild animal. What he saw puzzled him. He dismissed what he saw as he dismissed his dreams. Then he saw images, as if he stepped out of his existence and observed himself from a distance and saw himself as wild animal. Without allowing it to come into that part of his consciousness made up of verbal knowledge, he began to know who he was and to know he couldn't continue to keep his knowledge contained.

He held Raven's individuality sacred. He could guide her, teach her and advise her, but he had to allow her to go in her own direction.

He had known all this for a long time, though he had not allowed it to coalesce in his conscious, rational mind.

He stepped forward to give her the small, wooden, carved Raven he had saved for her sixteenth birthday. He was not sure of its origins. His father had given it to him just before he died.

He thought it might have been carved by northwest coast Indians. He didn't know. Where it came from meant less to him than the awe he felt each time he looked at it or handled it. It was almost alive, almost Raven. It seemed to hold the power of life and of wisdom that Raven had, beyond the individual raven, the symbol that Raven had become in aboriginal mythology.

Sudden wind blew down out of the tall trees on the hill behind the shop, lifted dust and dead pine needles, and swirled around them with noise and activity in sunshine.

"You are Raven," he said. He hadn't known he would, but he said, "I am Coyote."

He handed her the small, carved piece of wood that felt warm and alive in his hand.

She reached to take it, not with a girl's hand with fingers and fingernails, but with a raven's foot, with hard, sharp claws below a scaled leg, below black feathers ruffled by the wind.

He stood on his hind legs, long, bushy tail assisting him to balance in his upright stance, front paws held out in front of him.

Then he dropped to all fours. She was prepared. Without consciously visualizing it, she had expected this. He had not. He was not prepared, or he would have run as soon as he heard Orville's pickup coming down the driveway. He stood still and looked at himself, Coyote manifested.

Orville's pickup skidded to a stop in the gravel. Orville jumped out and reached back into the cab for his rifle. Coyote killers of the west never grow out of their training. They never develop finesse. A neighbor's yard is as good a place to kill coyotes as any wild country around.

Raven cried out in alarm. Finally, Coyote realized what Orville was doing. He leaped, twisted in the air, and came down at a full gallop, headed the shortest way into the cover of dense timber. Wind blew dust from his tracks and nudged Orville enough that he didn't make the clean shot he intended.

The rifle bellowed into the wind. The bullet knocked Coyote's feet from under him, rolled him with the force of the blow. The bullet blew his left rear leg off above the foot. Coyote grabbed the foot in his teeth and disappeared at a three-legged gallop into the forest.

Orville was so startled by the coyote's actions that he didn't get his second shot. He said, "I'll be damned. I never saw an animal do anything like that before."

Raven rose on fast, black wings when the pickup came

down the driveway. She screamed at Coyote to run and at Orville to stop. From her wings, high in the air, she watched Coyote roll, grab his foot in his teeth and run. She thought coyote killers were not raven killers. She wasn't sure.

Orville set off into the timber, looking for tracks and blood to follow. Raven watched from high in the air. Orville concentrated on the ground and didn't know Raven circled above him.

Raven had no idea what would come next. First, they must somehow get Orville off the trail. If Coyote lived through the next few hours, and her knowledge of mythology gave her hope he would, then they must begin to understand how to live as Raven and Coyote in the modern world.