

GIVE-AWAY FOR A GO-AWAY  
(Copyright 2011 by Richie Swanson)

Running Flower always said Coyote stories must begin the traditional way. "One day Coyote was walking along, and he..."

But now Coyote crouched beside a blanket draped in a doorway, looking just a little in the direction he wished to walk. He gazed through another door, open, and out on the range a thick gray glare floated like a flat pool of water above the road, and Coyote saw himself on the bus, saw the great sweeping bend of the highway rise to a horizon of yellow mesas, and he knew tomorrow he would walk beside pinnacles of purple rock and beneath a turquoise sky.

Wood groaned behind him.

A knock. A whisper-like sliding. A foot shuffle.

The sounds went on and on, and finally Running Flower stood from her loom. Coyote leapt up, and she pushed out from behind the blanket, glancing at her hands, holding balls of wool against her waist. She blushed as though she were sorry, and Coyote kissed her, and her fingers stroked the back of his neck, feeling as soft as the yarn itself, light as feathers, and then they popped hot snaps of electricity around his hips.

And then Running Flower's eyes were wet in front of Coyote, tearful. And Coyote's eyes were also wet, and he and Running Flower glanced obliquely at the bus ticket folded inside the handle of Coyote's suitcase.

"An hour ago I was at our little lake, and I put an ankle in, and the water never felt so clean!" said Coyote. "The water is dark there, blue, almost purple! And the cottonwoods around it! Their leaves have just curled out into tiny green hearts and are shining like thousands of miniature mirrors!"

"I pulled my ankle out, Running Flower, and then I lay on the red sand below the cottonwoods, and an oriole with a bright orange breast perched on a high branch and pushed a note out into the air. The note grew thick, it hung suspended like a single long note pushed through a flute, it floated slowly down, and then I wished that you were lying on the sand too, and the note were sinking into both us.

"You and I can leave now, we can bathe in the lake and lie down in the sand and listen to the oriole's note and still have time to walk into town before I catch my bus."

Running Flower slid her hands from his hips and knelt above balls of wool scattered like pine cones on the floor. She giggled, happy she had dropped them while kissing Coyote. And then she looked thoughtfully at the sunlight flooding through a window. She picked up three balls of wool and carried them to the window's ledge and put a russet ball, chestnut ball and amber ball down in the bright light.

She stared at the balls of wool for a long time and then rearranged them on the ledge.

"My cousin visited that little lake last year," she said. "And now her man is nowhere, and she has a baby who only has a cotton blanket so old it has turned gray."

"And you will start to make the baby a beautiful wool blanket tomorrow," said Coyote.

Running Flower nodded, rearranging the balls of wool again. "The baby has brown hair, you know. And brown eyes. With a tint that is sorrel really."

"And you have tomorrow and many other days too!" said Coyote. "Weeks without me! It makes no sense to try to see that baby's blanket now!"

He yanked Running Flower's elbow, and finally they walked out of the house and up the shoulder of the highway together. The green haze of the cottonwoods shimmered out by the lake, and Running Flower reared, pinching Coyote's hand.

An immense snapping turtle crawled in the middle of the pavement, ridges like thorns on its tail, dim-dark eyes beneath dirty-black rumples on its flat, ugly face. Suddenly the turtle jerked its head sideways; a truck roared above it, and there was a scraping and a loud knock with a crack in it.

The turtle shot out from beneath the truck and skidded end-over-end, landing belly-down near the center line of the highway, entirely tucked inside its shell.

"Dead," said Coyote.

"But more trucks will come along, and they'll crush him," said Running Flower.

"The oriole might be on his way north, and besides, nature has its laws, and it is best to leave them alone."

"What laws?"

"If the turtle is cracked open by another truck, vultures and ravens will eat its flesh more easily."

Running Flower groaned and walked onto the road, and the turtle's head popped out of its shell. The turtle flung its neck up high and waved its head side to side, hissing, snapping its jaws so they clapped in the air.

Running Flower squatted down on the road and eyed the turtle. "I'll sneak behind him and grab his tail."

"You'll lose your hand!" Coyote grabbed Running Flower and hustled her to a barbed-wire fence, and he pushed and pulled a post furiously back and forth. Running Flower pulled at the wire on the post and twisted the wire and peeled it back, and finally the post fell from the wire.

Coyote ran to the road and pushed the turtle with the post, and the turtle flung its head sideways and snapped, and a chunk of wood flew onto the pavement.

A car honked, and Coyote leapt back. The car whizzed above the turtle, and there was another cracking knock, and then the car was gone, and the turtle spun roughly on its belly. Its feet clawed against the road, and its head jerked up, and its jaws snapped in mid-air again.

Running Flower ran behind the turtle, grabbed its tail, lifted the turtle waist-high. She carried it at arm's length through the break in the fence, and Coyote followed her, holding the post above his shoulder, cocked toward the turtle as the turtle wiggled its neck backward and snapped at Running Flower's knees.

Running Flower waved the post away with her free hand and dropped the turtle at the edge of a pool of muddy water.

"Fool!" Coyote cried. "He could have crippled you!"

"It does not matter!" said Running Flower.

"But this is our last day together!"

"You would let the turtle die!"

The turtle crawled slowly into the water, and then Coyote looked at his hands clinging to the post, the sun burning high in the sky, and Running Flower standing with

her back to him.

"Cattle will make trouble if we don't put this post back and twist the wire around it somehow," he said.

"I know," Running Flower said quietly.

"So, we won't have time to go and swim and listen to the oriole sing."

"No," said Running Flower.

"We will barely have time even to stop at your house on the way to the bus!"

"No."

"So, our good-bye is not half what it might have been!"

"But maybe it is as you say," said Running Flower. "Maybe nature has its laws, and it is best to leave them alone and to let things become whatever they may."

\* \* \*

And after Coyote went away, it was true. He walked along one day. But his feet ached from the hard pavement of the highway, and he threw himself down at the edge of a mesa, wrinkling his nose. Pinyon pines sloped down a sand-colored canyon below him, and a city lay at the bottom, adobe churches, loops of freeways, steel skyscrapers and a plaza with cottonwood trees that had sprouted leaves a week ago. The green hearts had been flat, paled with dust: the note of an oriole had floated down, and Coyote had studied jewelry set out on blankets, pins and lockets and fetishes, miniature bears and antelopes and spiders. He had admired glazes of clay, cuts of silver and inlays of turquoise, and now that he was up on the mesa, he wished he had decided to buy something.

A horn blared, and dust and pebbles banged against Coyote's back. A tractor-trailer truck raced down toward the city, and when the roar died, there was a sound like a hard clay plate wobbling across the pavement.

A tortoise flopped off the road, nearly as large as Running Flower's snapper, but it had no pointed nose or ridges like thorns, and it did not hiss. Its coppery shell shone as if polished, and it had a quilt of deep black grooves and a gouge in a square near the top. But there was no blood, and the desert tortoise slowly lifted its head and raised its heavy

eyelids.

"You are a stupid creature," said Coyote. "If you cannot learn to use culverts and cross beneath the highway, you will certainly become food for a vulture or raven."

"I am lucky for my shell," said the tortoise. "It protects me from many different kinds of blows, so I am very old, and I am able to see things younger creatures cannot."

"Like the undersides of trucks?" said Coyote.

"Yes, and when I was on the other side of the road, I saw that you were staring down into the canyon in a preoccupied way."

"I was resting."

"I thought maybe you had wished you had bought something down in the city, maybe for someone who was left at home?"

"I have already found that."

The tortoise stretched his legs in laborious fashion, crawling slowly around Coyote, looking him up and down.

"What did you buy?" he asked.

"A small piece of pottery," said Coyote, "a magnificent figure of a roadrunner."

"But I do not see it."

"No, you are right. I did not buy the roadrunner because I also wanted to buy a pair of earrings shaped like orioles."

"But I do not see those either."

"I could not buy the earrings because then I saw a glazed figure of a desert tortoise as black as coal and as smooth as a pearl."

"A fraud!"

"But I could not resist it."

"And I cannot believe it! Someone made a desert tortoise, and it had no grooves in its shell nor any wrinkles on its face nor any scales on its feet?"

"It is just the artist exercising his prerogative, Tortoise. It is just one of the infinite ways he may see you, boiled down to the essence of that vision and finally rendered into a tangible work."

"That is cockamamie!"

"Cockamamie? Figures are allowed to take any shape the artist wishes these days! I think you are sounding backward now, stuck inside the past!"

"And I think you are trying to anger me on purpose! I think you want to make me so mad I burst out of my shell, so you can make soup out of me with as little work as possible!"

Coyote hunched his shoulders in a weary way. He ran his yellow gaze across the dull black eyes of the tortoise and then stared at the gouge in the tortoise's shell.

"If I wanted to do that, I would just watch you crawl across the highway again, and when the next truck came along, I would simply wait for nature to take its course."

\* \* \*

Coyote and Tortoise walked along together. They left the highway and walked across the top of a mesa, and Coyote put his nose to the ground and trotted from one clump of rabbitbrush to another, and pretty soon he lost sight of Tortoise altogether.

The sun climbed to the top of the sky, and Coyote slipped beneath a juniper tree and lay in the shade on his belly. He listened for Tortoise scraping and sliding through the sand and pebbles, and out in the desert a shrike made a cry, and then a cherry-chore broke into the air. A thrasher in a juniper, Coyote thought, but then chirps twittered up the scale like a horned lark. And then a note grew thick, slow, suspended--an oriole--and Running Flower sat up on red sand at the swimming hole, beaming at a figure of a roadrunner in her hand. Or maybe a figure of a desert tortoise, or a pair of oriole earrings?

Coyote could not decide, and then the oriole ceased, and there was a husky ring, a buzz, a trill, certainly a sage sparrow. And a robin sang, and then Coyote knew it was only Mockingbird singing out in the juniper, fooling him.

Mockingbird grew silent, and a hard surface rubbed against Coyote's flank.

"I am right here," said Tortoise.

"I see that now," said Coyote.

"I was walking along slow and letting my old thoughts roam," said Tortoise.

"And I understood why you did not buy any of those gifts for Running Flower."

"I could not decide upon one."

"You chose none because none were real enough."

Coyote scanned juniper trees, listening for any faint sound of Mockingbird again. He lifted his nose, smelled for exhaust and wondered how many extra miles he had already walked from the plaza because he had left the road with Tortoise.

"Each gift was false in the same way," said Tortoise. "Each was only a mere representation of an authentic being that actually pulses with true life."

Coyote shook his head no and twitched his nose toward a distant fume of gasoline. "You are only sounding backward again."

"That may be so," said Tortoise, and he crawled from beneath the juniper tree and looked behind his shell. "But it is your nose now, isn't it, Coyote, that is pointed in that direction?"

\* \* \*

Coyote and Tortoise walked to the end of the mesa and followed a gulch down into a narrow canyon, and Coyote's feet ached again. A stream reflected a clear silver light and rushed above ochre-colored stones, and Tortoise rested near the water on a sunny spot of clay-colored dirt.

Coyote took off his boots, lay beneath a bush, closed his eyes, and the slide and ripple of the creek soothed his ears, and wind made popping noises across pockmarks in the pink walls of the canyon and blew easily across his feet.

"You are right again!" he said suddenly to Tortoise. "I see what you mean now! The gifts I nearly bought for Running Flower were not the true things I thought!"

"They did not express the secret you have inside yourself for her," said Tortoise.

"Ayh!" Coyote gawked at the leathery folds of skin that rumbled up from behind Tortoise's eyes and covered the top of his head. "You seem so dense and yet you think such bright thoughts. Tell me how you do it."

There was a splash. Tortoise swam to the opposite bank and crawled deliberately

to dry ground and paused in the sun again, and his head drooped down, and his wet gouge shone like fibrous white tissue, tinged with a soft shade of pink.

Tortoise turned his head toward a tree that had flat white blossoms paling above a clearing of spindly grass.

"Throw me into that choke cherry tree, and I will show you how," he said.

"But your shell is cracked," said Coyote. "Are you sure you are sound?"

"Yes, I am certain I am sound."

"But you have already been hit by a truck today."

"And so was the snapping turtle Running Flower threw into the mud, you said! And he survived so well that you are as jealous as a fox of him!"

Coyote grimaced. He waded across the stream and heaved Tortoise into the air, and Tortoise flew into the tree and thudded against its trunk. Branches snapped, and twigs fell down. Leaves spiralled out from below the tree, and flowers floated down too, looking like white butterflies.

Coyote ran beneath the tree and peered up into it, and in the sunlit foliage he saw no dark round shape that could have been his friend.

"Tortoise!" he yelled, and a sound broke into the air above the tree.

"Chorry, chorry-chore. Chorry, chorry-chore. Chorry-chore."

Coyote glared at Mockingbird perched at the top of the tree.

"It is fine you are up there now, and you are a bird that has no true song of his own!" said Coyote. "But you still have not said how you understood those things about the gifts for Running Flower!"

Mockingbird flapped above the cherry tree, showing off the white patches on his wings. He dropped into the tree again and then burst out of it, flying around with strange loops of string dangling from his bill. He let go of the loops, and Coyote caught them as if he could not wait to toss them away. The loops had thick, rough edges and looked fuzzy and unkempt, and their colors looked dull as if all the light around them were going dim. An unexciting cream. A dull red like an faded cut of sandstone. A weak burnished orange with a streak of purple in it like the purple of a mountain at the end of the sky at the end of the day.



"Your gift for Running Flower," said Mockingbird.

"But they are all in a useless heap!" said Coyote. "They have no form whatsoever and could never show any definite feeling to anyone!"

"They will please the woman you wandered from."

"No, no, you are trying to say so many things you are speaking in eighty-four directions at once!"

"Only backward again," said Mockingbird, and he pushed a single long note into the air, and the note spread out in a rich tone, and hung suspended and floated down, and suddenly Coyote felt tired and sad.

"See?" said Mockingbird.

"I am not sure," said Coyote. "I was hoping you were speaking a little forward too."

"I was," said Mockingbird. "On top of the canyon wall we can burn juniper and pinyon pine and watch the stars in the night. Sit with me, and I will tell you how that wool came to be and how it is the best give-away you can imagine."

\* \* \*

Mockingbird flew to the rim of the canyon, and Coyote climbed a faint trail that angled from one pockmark to another up a steep wall of rock. He came to Mockingbird's campfire only after a phosphorescent rose and dying burst of yellow eased into gray and silver tones on the horizon.

Coyote's feet pulsed with pain again, and he threw off his boots and sat on a dead log and rubbed his feet in a stiff breeze.

Mockingbird perched on the log next to Coyote, but Coyote would not look at his friend.

"You made yourself some wings!" he said. "Why couldn't you slow down and make me some too? It was hard getting up here! During the whole climb I felt as if you put me off!"

Mockingbird stared into the breeze and blinked as if he had not heard any

complaint. He tucked his bill against his breast, and feathers on one shoulder fluffed in the wind, and on the other stayed still as though stuck by pine resin.

Coyote leaned close in the dusk, and Mockingbird flew up and hissed at Coyote's snout and dropped down to the base of the sitting log.

Mockingbird hopped into a shadow below the firelight, and settled himself, and told the story of the wool.

\* \* \*

"It happened just after this world had been made," said Mockingbird, "right down in the pink canyon below us. Your friend Oriole was there, perched in a brand-new cottonwood tree, chattering a chat-chat that bubbled freely from him. Oriole thought the splendid new world had come with nothing so curious as a dead weed hanging across his perch, and he pulled playfully at it until a look-alike--a bird with the same olive face and pale yellow breast as he--dangled upside down on a branch above him, clucking softly. Young Lady Oriole! Oriole felt a flutter, wanted to sing it somehow, and he opened his bill, and his chat-chat rattled out again, and it sounded monotonous and sharp, raucous really, like a cranky and boisterous blackbird.

"Young Lady Oriole darted out of the cottonwood and flew a straight line down the canyon, and Oriole flew uselessly to the ground. He tore at weeds, ripping long strips from old flower stems, wishing he would uncover a seed that would taste sweet and make his voice sound smooth. But the weed fibers tasted dry and bitter, were stringy and frayed, and really had no color and no shape, no form that could mean anything to any bird at all.

"There was a quiet sniffing behind Oriole--the first coyote in the world, Old Coyote on his haunches, his fur as plain as the dead weeds that hid all of him except for his black nose, ear-tips and the slow yellow slide of his look.

"You are an ignorant bird, trying to make a song like that," said Old Coyote, and then he and Oriole walked along.

"First Mockingbird sings and changes his notes one after another, inventing

songs without ceasing,' said Old Coyote. 'I asked the creator if I could trade something for this same gift, but the creator is fixing things everywhere. Many creatures are fumbling around as you are, testing new ways, getting discouraged. I myself cannot sleep. I have only this thin fur, and when I lay down in my den to get out of the heat, the rock feels rough on my skin. I complained to the creator, and he gave me this fur that Sheep lost when she rubbed against a juniper tree.'

"Old Coyote pulled a dirty white wad from the pit of a front leg.

"I asked the creator if I could trade something, so he could add the fur to my coat, and he only answered that he has the same kind of problem you have, Oriole. He wants to make a night, a break from the sun, and he has thick black mud, but every time he starts to rub it across the sky, his fingers get too hot and dry, and the mud crumbles down to the earth.'

"We'll give the creator colors for a sunset, and he'll have a cooler time to paint the night,' said Oriole. 'He'll give me songs and make your coat heavier.'

"He has the red of blood and the pink of this canyon already and wants a color to mix between the two.'

"I can fly into the desert and get the creator a chip of sandstone.'

"The creator has the glitter of a gold stone and the blazing yellow of the sun and wants a color to mix with these two.'

"I have a friend called Redstart who wears a burnished orange on his wings.'

"The creator has the turquoise of the sky and the darker blue of his lake and wants a color to mix with these.'

"There is a swallow who has a tail like a scissors and wings as narrow as knife blades and wears a cape of purple.'

"The creator wants one more,' said Old Coyote, 'a color that lasts only a second. He wants it after a late evening downpour when high clouds spread out and fill all of the sky except for a few patches of waning blue. The sun will be close to touching the horizon, hidden by low clouds, and will not shine with rays but will send out a buttery glow. And in the glow the bottoms of clouds will be a grayish purple, and edges will turn such a soft color that anyone who notices will feel a wonder and a pride and a huge

happiness and a cold, lonely chill all at once.'

"`A cream color!' said Oriole. `A buff! The purple swallow wears it on his belly!"

"Oriole flew off and returned and dropped a chip of sandstone and buff, orange and purple feathers in front of Old Coyote, and Old Coyote tucked these things into the wad of fur in his leg-pit and then lifted his snout toward a tall cottonwood.

"`The creator said you were not high enough before,' he said. `Perch at the very top, and instead of your chat-chat, you will sing a beautiful note.'

"Oriole flew to the tall cottonwood and saw Young Lady Oriole twisting a fiber around the tip of a branch.

"`I found this under your tree, and a lot of others too,' she said. `Now if you sing a good clear song, so I can sit on eggs and always hear if you are near, I can make a nest and hang it like a neat little basket.'

"Oriole flexed his throat and sang, and his old chat-chat rattled out of him and rang with all its raucous tones around Young Lady Oriole.

"Oriole swooped down to the trail in the canyon, but there was only dirt and inch-high grass there. He flew above the trail that led to the creator and his blue lake, and he looked under all the other trees and in weeds and pockmarks of the canyon walls, but Old Coyote was nowhere.

"A song came from halfway up the tall cottonwood.

"`Chorry. Chorry-chore. Chorry-chorry.'

"First Mockingbird flashed the white spots on his wings at the top of another cottonwood, and then he pushed out a single thick note, and the note spread out in a rich tone and hung suspended, and Oriole flew to meet it. Oriole perched beside First Mockingbird, and First Mockingbird sang the note again, and Oriole studied the tilt of his new friend's bill and the puff of his throat. Oriole lifted his own bill, and then Young Lady Oriole landed just below him, fanning her wings. He felt his old flutter and a warmth swell against his breast, and he pushed the swelling into the air, and now the single thick note piped from him, and Young Lady Oriole wiggled her tail. Oriole blushed, and the olive feathers on his head turned a handsome black, and the yellow feathers on his breast turned the burning-bright orange you see on Man Orioles today.

"Oriole sang his note again, and another oriole sang from a quarter mile up the canyon, and a third sang from across the canyon. Farther up the canyon a fourth and fifth oriole sang, and then the afternoon sounded like early morning, and orioles were piping from all directions.

"Old Coyote lay in the shadow of a rock, snarling to himself. The singing was a tedious ruckus really, rising frivolously as if it would never sink down--and then Old Coyote felt a strange, warm swelling in his chest, and he hopped nervously to his feet. His wad of fur dropped from his leg-pit, burnished orange now, pale pink, cream, streaked purple. Old Coyote pawed anxiously at the wad, and his yellow eyes slid across the colors in disgust. They were not nearly as plain as weeds, would never blend into his fur and hide him, and he wondered what terrible thing had cheated him out of a gift that had come from the creator himself.

"Another song burst into the air above him, a kind of a laughing.

"'Chorry-chorry. Chorry-chore-chore-chore. Chorry-chorry.'

\* \* \*

The breeze had stopped, and stars had crowded the sky, and the juniper and pinyon had burned into yellow nubs, throwing a faint light on Coyote's shins.

In a deep shadow a bill scraped and swiped feathers, fussed, stopped.

"Coyote, I feel cold, and your hands are much better for gathering wood than my bill," said Mockingbird.

"I will get more wood," said Coyote. "But you have not told me how you came to own the wool or how it changed into yarn yet."

"That will take a long time, and the coals will die."

"Die? They will not!" Coyote blew on the yellow nubs, and they turned white-hot. "See?"

"You have plenty of breath."

There were no words for a while. There was more fussing in the shadow, and then Mockingbird started the story again.

"When Old Coyote traded the colored feathers and chip of sandstone, the creator gave him a little more cleverness and nothing else. Old Coyote whined and kicked the wad of fur as if it were a dirty rag.

"`You know this is no good for my fur now!' he said. `I gave you things to help you paint the sky! You could at least weave this wool into a mat for me to sleep on!"

"`There is only one bird in the canyon who is a meticulous weaver,'" said the creator. `You can use your cleverness and trade that bird something, and maybe it will make you a mat. The bird is Oriole.'

"Old Coyote picked up his wad of fur and skulked along, wrinkling his nose at rabbitbrush, finding nothing but worn-out smells. He saw the creator had put more new things in the canyon--mud houses in pockmarks, turkeys in pens, kivas, smoke from sipapus--and things dressed in hides, drumming and chanting, grunting as they lifted heavy boulders. People.

"Old Coyote walked hidden in weeds and came to a woman sitting alone in the shade beneath a ponderosa pine, her hands so busy she did not notice him. She pulled and tugged at a wad of fur with two pieces of prickly pear, and the wad turned into a long strip with cottony edges.

"She was Carding Woman, and she paused, walked away and squatted, and when Old Coyote smelled her urine, he came out of the weeds and tucked his wad of wool on top of hers. He lay in a bush, and the woman came back and smiled as if she could not believe the colors were real. She plucked at Old Coyote's wad until it was fluffy and then worked it with her cacti and spun it on a stick until it became the way it is now, a fine thick-feeling twine, ready for weaving.

"She made the yarn into loops, and Old Coyote roughed up the fur on his neck and charged out of the bush, baring his teeth, and Carding Woman whirled, shrieked and fell, and he snatched the wool and ran. When he reached his den, he remembered the woman's fear, and he laughed a whiny laugh, short and weak, but it made him feel strong, clever too, and then he eased himself into a dark shadow just inside a ledge and coiled his loops of wool like the cup of a nest. He scratched his nails against the rock, making a noises like nestlings crying for food. He scraped out sorry-sounding squeaks, brief and

discordant, and then his cleverness began to work.

"First Mockingbird landed beside the coiled loops of wool and peered down into the cup at the center of the loops, and Old Coyote jumped out of the shadow and wrapped his jaws around First Mockingbird, pressing his teeth against his skin.

"'I can give you the gift of making voices,' said First Mockingbird. 'But I must perch beside you and show you just how to tilt your head and arch your throat, and then you must close your eyes and think of how the desert will be when there is only you and a hard dusty ground for a bed and a million stars for a ceiling. You must think how it will be when there is nothing else but miles and miles of empty moonlight before there is another coyote who can hear and understand and maybe answer you.'

"Down floated from Old Coyote's mouth, and his saliva grew warm around First Mockingbird's breast.

"'If I do not eat you, you will forget all the songs you were made with,' said Old Coyote.

"And even now mockingbirds are trying to learn the songs again. They sing them exactly as they hear them, Coyote! When Cardinal draws out a whistle, mockingbirds do not shorten it. They do not take away the whistle or smooth it out or turn it into an expression of one of the infinite ways they have heard the whistle. No, after Cardinal has stopped singing, mockingbirds do not distort the memory, not at all!

"First Mockingbird stayed in the pockmark and tilted his head back, and Old Coyote arched his head back too. Old Coyote thought of the things First Mockingbird had told him, and Old Coyote whined, and his whining turned into high-sounding yips. His yips grew throaty and reedy, and then they came from a second coyote across the canyon, from a third and a fourth, and Old Coyote made cries that seemed to shatter the air as they leapt into it.

"First Mockingbird hopped behind Old Coyote and picked up the wool and flew off with it, and all this time mockingbirds have kept it to remind ourselves we can be meddlesome and must be careful of creatures who would fool us. That is why I have given the wool to you instead of things that did not seem real enough, Coyote. You know its story now, and so, please, give it back to the women's side of the world and let happen

to it whatever may happen."

\* \* \*

The yellow coals burned down to a light orange glow barely pulsing inside black ashes.

Coyote felt for the wool in his lap and touched the soft thickness of it and then shook the strings of yarn happily up and down.

"Thank you, Mockingbird!" he said. "I see it now! This wool is my singing to Running Flower!"

"It is your give-away for a go-away to her."

"Running Flower will take the wool and weave it into a blanket, and when I return home, she and I will slip beneath the colors of the sunset together!"

"Maybe that will be so."

"What do you mean? That will certainly be so!"

"I am not so sure, Coyote. The air has turned so cold, and I feel too weak to think. You promised you would get some wood before. I wish you would get it now."

Coyote walked into junipers and pinyon pines, twisted-murky forms in the starry light, and he picked up dead slabs of wood. He put a slab on the black ashes, and a flame danced up, and a copper shell glowed at the base of the sitting log.

"Tortoise!" laughed Coyote, and then he saw a pool of liquid in Tortoise's gouge, dark, running up to the cracked edges of Tortoise's shell. He grabbed his wool from the sitting log, knelt by his friend, and Tortoise rubbed his chin meekly against the ground.

"Don't," said Tortoise. "The wool is Running Flower's gift and should not have the blood color on it."

"I could have done this before!" said Coyote. "But you said you were sound! Now I am going to press hard and stop your bleeding."

"Lift me again! You'll see! It will do no good!"

Coyote lifted Tortoise, and a wide puddle of dark blood lay on the ground.

Coyote cried out and dropped the wool beside Tortoise and piled slab after slab of



wood on the fire.

"This will keep you warm!" he said. "I am going for a veterinarian!"

"It will take a day to walk out to the highway," said Tortoise.

"I can make it in a few hours!"

"If I am here alone at dawn, a raven or hawk or vulture may come and dig its beak into my broken shell before I am dead."

"I'll get more wood! I'll pile it on top of you, and you can stay hidden!"

"There are animals who can smell my blood and push the wood aside, Coyote."

"Not if I hurry!"

Coyote leapt up and ran to pinyon pines and junipers and stuffed his arms full of slabs of wood. He returned to a blazing fire, and Tortoise lay tucked in his shell, the wool a sloppy swirl in front of him.

"I see," said Coyote. "You want me to sit beside you?"

Tortoise did not answer. Coyote dropped down beside his friend and pressed the wool into a ball and placed it gently into Tortoise's gouge. The yarn was in Coyote's shadow and turned a blackish red. Coyote lifted the yarn a moment and saw pinkish flesh, wet and swollen, and sinew and tiny shards from the broken shell in the gouge, and suddenly the gouge flooded with blood again.

Coyote pressed the wool down again, and a pulse beat up through the yarn and into Coyote's hand, and Coyote felt a fervent hope.

Tortoise slid his head slowly out of his shell and into the yellow firelight.

"Don't fuss!" said Coyote. "Rest! That is your best hope now! Rest!"

The lids of Tortoise's eyes closed heavily and then blinked open again.

"That figure of a desert tortoise that came without any cracks in it, do you remember it, Coyote?" he asked.

"Yes, but you gave me a much better gift already!"

"That figure was finished? A completed form, and it will never be anything else?"

"I guess so, yes."

"And the figure of the roadrunner and the oriole earrings? They were finished and will never be anything else?"

"I suppose not, no."

"And that blanket you spoke of?"

"It will be the best gift of all!"

"But if the wool were thought of as a blanket, it would also be called finished, a completed form. There would be no way to call it anything else, a shawl or a sweater or a skirt?"

"Of course not, but forget that! Let yourself rest!"

"But I think that is how the things were not real enough, why you could not buy them! You held those figures in your hand, and they made no swelling inside you, and so your feet were locked in place, and your hands could not reach into your wallet and turn any of those things into a give-away for a go-away. But when there is a swelling in you, you are like you are now. You cannot hold yourself still, and nothing can be finished. Do you see it? A give-away for a go-away is best when it is like the wool there, ready to take any form that might be possible."

"It cannot be a true thing that is fixed in a certain way," said Coyote.

"Exactly!" shouted Tortoise, and the flesh in his shell heaved up and then shrank down, and Coyote pulled the wool from Tortoise's gouge and walked away from the fire. Coyote stood with his back to Tortoise and twisted the wool, and a patter fell against the desert, and Coyote knew it went on too long. Coyote waited for it to cease and then carried the wool into the firelight.

Tortoise's head lay twisted on the ground, and the lids of his eyes were closed. Coyote put the wool in the gouge again and pressed down, and a warmth rose stingily from Tortoise's flesh.

"My friend?" said Coyote.

Tortoise straightened his head and opened his eyes.

"Now I am going to make a give-away for a go-away to you," said Coyote.

"You have accepted that I am dying?" said Tortoise.

"And so I will make the give-away for other tortoises and for turtles too."

"But those things have ancient forms that have been complete for eons, and anything you give them will only be another encumbrance."

"I will give them eyes like eagles, so they can see trucks and cars coming a long way off."

"But even with those eyes, they will take a long, slow time to cross the highway."

"I can give them legs that move swiftly."

"And the weight of their shells would surely make those legs ache so they could barely move."

"I can lighten their shells."

"And bears and wolves would be able to bite into turtles and tortoises with their teeth."

"Then I will give them people."

Tortoise twisted his head stiffly toward Coyote. "Those beings who carry thousands of pounds of steel with them wherever they go, and who insist upon moving inside the steel as fast as possible?"

"People like Running Flower," said Coyote, "people who walk along slow and notice all the color in the world, and when they see the luster of a turtle or tortoise crawling on a road, flutters will pound inside their chests, and no matter where they are going or who calls them fools, they will stoop down and carry one of you slow creatures away from the highway until you are safe."

"I like this gift, but I am afraid it is like one of those figures you nearly bought," said Tortoise. "It does not seem real enough."

"I will start with myself, Tortoise. I am bound to walk along, and wherever I walk, I will watch for you and your kind and carry them across highways. Whenever I meet a new friend, I will tell them what happened to you and me today. Then your give-away for a go-away will not be finished. Those people will have it too, and maybe they will carry turtles and tortoises across roadways also."

Tortoise lifted his head abruptly and peered at Coyote with dull black eyes.

"You have found two perfect give-aways in the same day!" he said.

"You and I found them together," said Coyote.

"You and I and Running Flower."

"That is right. You and I and she."

Tortoise blinked through a heavy film. His head drooped to the ground, and his eyes closed, and they did not open again. Coyote touched a fingertip to Tortoise's head and ran it softly across rumples, and he lifted the wool, and blood was shallow in the gouge, and the flesh inside the shell felt cold and had no pulse.

There was a swelling at Coyote's chest, and it burst and turned into a ripping, and Coyote threw back his head and howled. He held Tortoise on his lap and whined and made long keening cries that seemed to shatter his insides as they leapt up through him.

Flames flared by Coyote's feet and dimmed gradually to a scant glow, and Coyote wiped his tears and was surprised by a dusky brown hump on his lap, and the loops bunched on the shell, gray and vague and fuzzy.

Across the desert a pale white glow lit up the horizon, and an inky purple and then a deep navy spread through the sky. The crooked shapes of junipers and pinyon pines emerged just past the sitting log, and a dove cooed from the ground, and a raven croaked from some high place.

Coyote bent forward and rubbed a cheek and then pressed an ear against the cold shell of the dead tortoise. A sound rose up out of the canyon, you know, and it was like an echo when it reached Coyote.

"Chorry-chore. Chorry-chore. Chorry-chorry-chore."