

Protection

by Kathryn Kulpa

Her boyfriend's dog was killed by the coyote. She was washing her face when she heard it, snarls and yips followed by what could only be called a scream. She ran outside, wiping soap from her face with her hands. Her boyfriend followed with a flashlight. He had never lived in the country before. I just let him out to pee, he said.

The coyote ran off when it saw them. She caught a glimpse of skinny flanks and fat tail, yellow-grey in the moonlight. They found the dog, chewed and bloody but still breathing. She touched his side, spoke his name, but he did not respond. We'll get you to the vet's, her boyfriend kept telling the dog. We'll get you fixed up, you'll be okay.

The dog lay in her lap, soaking her tee-shirt and short pajama bottoms with blood. There was blood around his mouth, too, she saw. He had beagle in him and had probably fought the coyote, protecting his place.

You're a good dog, she whispered to him, a good brave dog. Her face was tight with soap. She remembered being thirteen and on her way home from the vet where their terrier Tessie had just been spayed. She sat in the pickup holding Tessie on her lap with her face turned away from her mother, who'd sneaked the operation in while she was in school. She remembered Tessie's fur, cold with the smell of alcohol and some chemical, and the flood of warm wet when Tessie peed all over her jeans and new winter coat. Her father yelled at her later because it soaked through to the seat. Dogs belong in the back, he said. Tessie lay drugged and listless all that night but was up at six the next morning, paws tap-dancing the bedroom floor, ready for her walk.

Her boyfriend's dog wouldn't do that. He died in her lap on the way to the vet's. She felt his body grow lighter suddenly, vacated, then heavy and still. She knew but she didn't tell her boyfriend. Let him speed; let him suffer. He'd argued with her when she'd wanted to use their tax refunds to put in a fence. She'd told him about the

neighbor's cat, told him how she saw the coyotes' eyes shining yellow in her headlights when she came down their gravel drive at night.

Nature's not about fences, her boyfriend had said, looking out their back door to the woods. Isn't that the whole point of choosing to live in the country, to be more in harmony with the natural cycles

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What makes you think people get to pick where they live? she said. I live here because it's where my family comes from.

Okay, and I moved here, he said. We're not all assigned to the land like Russian peasants.

Maybe some of us are more peasants than others.

His bottom lip vanished under his top one. He told her he would look online, that there was some new eco-friendly fencing he'd read about. He'd told her that instead of telling her no, but three months later they still had no fence.

He was soft. She'd liked him for that softness once, thought there was something saving and restful behind it, something that winter-red, sandpaper-skinned men like her father and brothers, other men she'd taken home, didn't have. But softness did you no good if other things had to suffer for it.

How's the little guy doing, he asked, and she could hear it, all that softness, that need to please in his voice. She missed his dog already. She didn't miss her boyfriend yet, but in her mind he was already gone. He was someone who had lived in so many places, Philadelphia, Boston, Asheville, St. Paul. He'd be heading somewhere else soon. She'll be staying here. She wondered how long she needed to wait before she'd have to tell him.

