

In the Beginning

The Great Spirit created the earth and then the animals. Each animal looked the earth over and began to do what seemed suitable for it to do.

Beaver and her mate, Beaver, walked along the banks of several rivers and decided they would live in the river and forage on land. They thought if they dammed the river, they could spread the water over a large area and use the pond for dwelling, for a buffer from land-dwelling animals, and for growing and storing their food.

They felled softwood trees and saplings and chewed them into pieces, dragged the pieces into the river and built a dam. The river spread to a large pond, and Beavers found their idea worked very well.

They built ponds and marshes up and down the river. Willows, cottonwoods, aspen, and alder, marsh grasses and low shrubs spread and grew densely along the river.

Beaver bore young, and the young grew and bore young. Colonies of beavers spread up and down the river. Beavers journeyed over ridges and mountains to other creeks and rivers. Colonies spread up and down those streams.

At the same time, all the other animals made their way in the world.

A restless and far-ranging animal, Coyote explored mountains, valleys, canyons, and ridges. He saw oceans, deserts, rivers, and smaller streams. He made his living as he went, and he multiplied his species as he went.

Coyote trotted through the densely-growing pine trees toward the river. The valley had changed since he last traveled through it. Multitudinous willow, alder, and cottonwood dams spread the river wide and lazy now. Rich smells of wildlife blew to him on moist breezes, smells of ducks, geese, swans, rails, small marsh birds that hid in the grasses, snakes, turtles, fish, insects, frogs.

Coyote had become bored with his diet of berries, roots, grasses, and mushrooms. He thought a coyote's teeth might be just right for turning one of those beaver kits going down the long slide into a meal.

He approached in a friendly and well-concealed manner, pounced, snapped, and found the kit tasty, tender, filling, and nutritious. The kit's

broad, flat tail was particularly rich and tasty.

Beaver pursued Coyote, but Coyote picked up the remnants of his meal and trotted up the ridge. Beaver was out of his element and had to give up the chase.

Beaver said Coyote had stepped far outside the bounds of civilization, but he didn't know what to do. Then Coyote took a second kit, and a third. In the midst of his grief and anger, Beaver went on with his work, since going on with his work fulfilled his nature. He cut willow saplings and dragged them to the river. One sapling he had cut off at a sharp angle caught behind a willow stump, bent, and then sprang straight and jabbed him in the leg, bringing blood.

Beaver studied his wound. He studied the sapling that had wounded him. Then he selected stouter saplings and cut them into lengths and chewed them very sharp.

The next time Coyote leaped from cover to try to take a beaver kit for his lunch, Beaver and a dozen full-grown offspring attacked Coyote. Thirteen spears penetrated Coyote's body. Only his immortality as the progenitor of his species saved his life, but he was nonetheless sorely wounded.

Coyote had great difficulty fleeing up the hill. Spears protruded from him in every direction and banged against everything he passed. It took him a long time and cost him great pain to extract all the willow spears and to heal his extensive injuries.

He made no effort to quell his anger nor to blunt his desire for revenge. With sharp, deadly teeth, swift and silent paws, he had never thought of using anything else to defend himself.

But this thing Beaver had done, modified something from his environment and used it for a weapon, pierced his mind more sharply even than the willow spears had pierced his body. What Beaver had done suggested so many possibilities.

While Coyote picked leaves from a bush for a poultice for his wounds, he got his first really powerful idea. Consumed by his thought, not really devoting his attention to what he was doing, he picked leaves from the bottom of a branch. The branch bent down, and when the leaves broke away, the limb sprang up and slapped his face.

The idea hit him much harder than the branch did. He never did finish

dressing his wounds. He limped and hobbled busily about all afternoon. Spots and dribbles of blood traced his paths as he gathered tools and materials, experimented, figured, and refined his idea to fit what he could find to work with.

By late afternoon, his wounds stopped bleeding, though he was sore and stiff all over. He knew he should lay up in the shade and heal for a few days, but he was driven by the idea that there was no time to waste. Strike while the willow is supple, he thought, for time will make it brittle.

Two days later, he had a working model. But it was neither powerful enough nor accurate enough, so he began building again, trying to correct the deficiencies in a second version. He hadn't eaten nor rested since he started the project. A fever ran through him from the effects of his wounds, and he focused completely on what he was doing, so he didn't know Bear was coming until Bear broke into a full, roaring charge. Coyote's mind functioned at very high speed, and he had his machine ready, so he just turned it into position and cut the line.

Bear had been examining the day and making a meal of berries, barks, roots, insects, grubs and herbs as he wandered. He topped the ridge and spotted Coyote busily building at the edge of the brush and timber in a small hollow down the ridge. Bear sank down into the brush until nothing showed but his eyes, ears, and nose, and he watched, listened, and smelled. He watched for a long time, but he still hadn't any idea what Coyote was doing.

The opportunity was too good to pass up; he did know that. Usually, Bear didn't hold a grudge, but Coyote had made himself an exception. Coyote loved to make the point that wit, speed, and agility meant more than brawn, power, and steady determination. Until now, Bear's peaceful constitution kept him from wanting to attack Coyote just to attack, so their confrontations, when Coyote provoked Bear to attack, always came at Coyote's choice of place and time.

Coyote always planned his escape ahead of time and made Bear the buffoon. Bear knew he was as fast and as agile as Coyote, though his greater size made his turns wider and his stopping longer, and he could not fit into nor through the places Coyote could. When Bear was angry, his determination made him look more the fool as he tried to squeeze into, dig under, or fight his way through when Coyote was long gone and up at the

top of the ridge, laughing at him.

Bear stalked down through the edge of brush, as quiet on his feet as any cat, slowly, one careful step at a time, keeping Coyote always in the center of his vision. When he reached the edge of the brush and nothing but open ground lay between him and Coyote, he stopped and watched a moment longer, but he still couldn't figure out what Coyote was doing, so he trotted silently out of the brush.

When he was close enough to know beyond doubt that Coyote was lunch meat, he broke into a full gallop, and a great roar of victory and joy rose from his ground-thumping feet, clear up through his massive body and out his gigantic, pearly-toothed, wide-open mouth.

Coyote looked up, turned the agglomeration of willow parts he had built, and cut the line. He had selected a jagged stone about half the size of Beaver's head for his catapult, figuring it would destroy Beaver's skull and carry away his brain and his higher sensory organs. Some forms of physical destruction gave even the immortal progenitors a rough time to pull through.

Though he had not selected the stone for Bear, Coyote nonetheless felt well satisfied with the damage it did. It hit Bear in his wide-open, roaring mouth and immediately quenched both his roar and his forward motion. The stone drove straight down Bear's throat and took all his teeth with it, through him lengthwise, and out his anus, not bothering with any of the subtleties of curves or convolutions of tissue. As it exited, it cut off his long, bushy tail and then stuck deep into a pine tree behind Bear, splattering blood, gore, and shit when it hit.

Coyote nearly ruined his own guts laughing at what had happened to Bear and how he looked now. "Haw, haw, haw, hee hee. Bear, you should have seen it. Haw, haw, haw, listen, Bear, hee hee hee haw, you sure did shit a rock. Haw Haw haw."

He fell down in the sand and lay rolling about, helpless. Bear realized later he could have had him right then, even without teeth. A few rips from his powerful claws would have ended Coyote's enjoyment in short order, but Coyote had just become a much more dangerous beast than he had ever been. Bear didn't know it would take Coyote time to cock and reload his machine.

Even in the midst of his weakening hysteria, Coyote pulled himself up

by his machine and started rewinding it. Bear turned and retreated up the hill. He didn't feel well. His insides gurgled and sloshed as he ran. He had to stop and plug up his blown-out asshole to keep his contents from sloshing out of him onto the ground.

He put several ridges between himself and Coyote before he holed up in a blown-down thicket and tried to figure out how to start putting himself back into shape.

Coyote danced and sang. He had done it. It worked. He was victorious. He was invincible. He was hungry. He felt weak almost to paralysis. He fell down with giggling every time he thought of the rock reaming out Bear and sticking, ka-thud, into the tree. If he didn't get something to eat very soon, he'd fall down and be unable to get up. He set off upriver to see what he could find.

When he had gone, Great Blue Heron and Sandhill Crane landed in Coyote's work area and examined his machine. Crane said, "I don't think it can shoot straight up."

"Don't bet your nest on it. All he'd have to do is tip the whole thing back, and it would shoot up."

Crane said, "I think we'd have a very hard time building anything like that. We aren't built for that kind of work."

Heron said, "Well, I know one thing we can do. We can ignite branches at that smoldering coal seam up on the ridge and drop them on him."

"He's pretty fast on his feet. He could probably dodge. But we could burn off his cover and drive him out of this part of the country."

Heron said, "I don't know about that. Trouble is, his cover is also our cover and habitation for the things we eat."

"Security means something, doesn't it?"

"Sure it does. Sure it does. But..."

Bear suffered a lot of pain. He worked steadily and patiently and put all his innards back into order. He also put together a plan. He thought he could pull logs out of the blowdown and prop them above the trail so they would fall on Coyote and crush him. Bear thought he might be able to rig it so Coyote stepped on a concealed trigger, and the logs would fall on Coyote even if he, Bear, wasn't there to trigger it.

These ideas spread like the fire in summer-dried marsh grasses, that animals could use tools and techniques to protect themselves from other

animals, that the power they took for self defense could be used to usurp the possibility of other species developing more dangerous weapons and then attacking them.

No animal need fear the future.

Armaments and more refined armaments spread like the fire that burned the grass in the marsh and spread into the surrounding forests.

What started as territorial disputes between individuals soon involved entire species. Cranes, herons, geese and ducks allied to attempt to drive coyotes into the sea. Bears, coyotes, and ravens allied in an attempt to save their species from attacks on all sides, from various phalanxes of formerly prey species, defending their future by attacking who ate them most.

Vultures would not ally with anyone. Nor would they fight, beyond their normal defense of puking on the attacker and, if possible, flying away. "Foolishness," they said, "Eating up the future. There is far more than we can eat now, but there will come a famine."

Foxes researched the plants around them, extracted poisons, and used them effectively, in water, in the air, on sharp weapons. Eaters of those killed by poisons died from the poisons.

One species set fires and burned off the cover and food for another species. Another species burned in retaliation, in self-defense, because another species might be able to hide and then attack from concealment. Nobody trusted anybody.

There were few. All were hungry. The earth lay quiet, except for dry desert wind blowing through burned-over forest.

It hadn't happened before. It would have been impossible even to conceptualize, ten generations ago, when the cranes and herons destroyed most of the shorter-legged birds and then began to quarrel and declared war between their two species, but the progression of history eroded resistance and wore away moral standards. Animals of the earth progressed into ever-more-developed forms of war, into ever-smaller need for a reason to go to war, and they opened a place in their minds for a new concept to root.

Coyotes looked at coyotes and thought, "There are too many in your pack, and your pack is crowding us," and they began the first war between members of the same species.

The Grand Old Heron, who had commanded eight generations without

question, was saved from assassination only by an in-quarters battle, in which 14 of the herons attempting and 11 of the loyal were killed. Warfare rendered the quarters and the area around the quarters uninhabitable.

The survivors of that battle expected to be given refuge at a nearby community, but instead, the warriors of that community, who understood the times were changing and all must protect their own survival, ambushed them as they approached. A world ravaged by warfare simply could not support very many herons. Accepting refugees risked starvation as too many herons gobbled up resources.

The ambush did not win the quick victory the attackers expected. Surprise gained them an advantage, but they didn't kill fast enough. Those who were attacked were veteran warriors, and they reacted quickly and effectively. The resulting battle lasted all that day and far into the night and destroyed a large part of the habitat close to the river.

Early in the development of warfare, the Great Spirit revoked the immortality of the progenitors, because it gave them an unfair advantage over their opponents. Other than taking that action, he did not intervene. In the beginning, he had agreed with all the animals that they would have free will. He created enough resources for all animals to live easily and devote their lives to study and advancement, but he left it to the animals to decide how they would use those resources and work among themselves, with other species, with the earth itself.

Those few who listened to what he told them of peace and harmony and refused to fight against other species or their own, he gathered up beside him, and together they watched as warfare ate the earth.

The Great Spirit felt deep sorrow at paths the animals on earth had chosen and decided it would not be necessary after all to create man.