

A Long-Necked Profile in Courage
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Dusk falls. Snow falls. Coyotes call from the meadow, the other side of a small strip of forest from me. I walk the dirt road through the forest, kicking ankle-deep snow as I walk.

At the edge of the forest, to my right, a coyote, a shadow of grey against growing darkness, trots beneath the trees, then stops and looks at me. Down ahead of me, at the edge of the forest, a shadow of grey against growing darkness, another coyote, stands, head turned toward me, watching me. Beyond it, almost obscured by the falling snow, a third coyote, stands, head turned toward me.

I stop, turn my head and look at one animal, then at the other two. I feel a little uneasy. I've seen many coyotes in the wild, and I've been close to some of them. I've never thought of them as any kind of a threat. They share my habitat, wild animals who watch me as I watch them. But I trust my intuition, and something is not quite right, or I wouldn't feel the faint uneasiness that tries to settle into my mind the way dusk settles on the forest and on the meadow.

I think of the Girl Scout ranch we took care of before this one, also in the Rocky Mountains, farther south in Colorado. I got up before daylight one morning, sat in front of the big south windows and watched daylight open on the mountain.

Dinty Moore, scout-named, dust-red llama, lay at ease in the pasture grass before sunrise, legs curled under him, long neck extended high above the meadow grasses. Two coyotes stood in front of him about thirty feet, close together, and another stood off to his left about the same distance. The three wild canines looked intently at Dinty Moore.

Llamas have a reputation for being fiercely protective of their territory. They are sometimes used as guard animals for less aggressive animals, such as sheep. The coyotes studying Dinty Moore might not have seen a llama before. Dinty didn't seem nervous about the long-furred, grey animals looking at him, but when one of the coyotes moved a step closer, Dinty Moore stood up and stepped toward the animal. The coyotes retreated rapidly up the hill. Apparently, the coyotes decided a mature Llama wasn't an animal they wanted to mess with.

Thinking of Dinty Moore, I walked toward the two coyotes ahead of me. They turned and ran into the falling snow. I turned and walked toward where I had last seen the coyote to my right. Dusk was heavier and heavier, but I saw a grey shadow turn and fade into the dusk and the snow falling on the meadow.

In my mind, I carry a catalog of information on what to do around wild animals that begin to act outside of their normal wildness and show unusual interest in me. I have different rules for each animal. I'm still fairly certain coyotes would never be a problem, but now I have a rule for a situation of doubt involving coyotes. Walk rapidly and confidently toward them. Think of Dinty Moore. Try to look long-necked.