

# Coyotes

A STORY BY LATANYA McQUEEN

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A week after mother left, my father started talking about leaving Mexico. One afternoon my father came home and took out a map. “Look son, this will be our path,” he said, pointing to the line he’d drawn from our town through east. “It is easier to go through Texas, and we will make our way from there.”

He told me the stories he’d heard from the other men as they waited at the job mart in the square. “This will not be like before. I should never have brought you to this city,” he said. I looked down at the line my father had drawn and listened to him talk. I had not wanted to leave, I couldn’t see how it would make things better. I wanted to tell him this, but I watched as he sat hunched over the map, staring into its wrinkled paper, as if he was able to see something more than what was there, and looking at him I couldn’t speak. I could only stare at the black, jagged line on the paper and hope that maybe he was right.

“Your father is a dreamer,” my mother would say. “But his dreams are never any good.” She would tell me this after coming home from work, her clothes still soiled from the dirt of the homes she cleaned. My father had brought us here from Veracruz, where before he had worked in the coffee plantations. He believed that there’d be more work and an easier life, but the city was overcrowded and polluted. He moved us to a shantytown in Huatenco that existed on the outskirts of Mexico City, up in the mountains. From here you could look down and see the smog surrounding the city, a gray haze that seemed to contain it.

“Maybe he is working, maybe he will bring home enough so that we can eat more than beans.” I would watch my mother as she’d begin to sauté onions in a pan. “I’m tired of eating beans,” my mother would say.

They are called Coyotes, the men who will take us across the Mexican border and into Texas. My father has paid them to be our guides because it is too dangerous to go alone, the journey too long. We had traveled to Monterrey where we met one of them, a broad-shouldered man with a thick moustache that sat like a slug on his lip. He did not tell us his name but drove us to a house in an abandoned town outside of the city. It is dusk by the time we get there. He took us to a room where we were to sleep, inside were other families all crouched on the floor, huddled in groups. The Coyote told us to wait here until morning.

“Listen, you must be careful tomorrow,” my father tells me, after we have settled down on the floor. “They are cunning people, these men. They will do what it takes to survive. They

LaTanya: The comma after “leave” creates a comma splice. Should we change it to a period or a semi-colon, or leave as is? Your call.



will take everything we have, and then we will never make it once we get across. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I tell my father. I want to ask him more questions about the Coyotes but my father doesn’t listen. He lies on the floor and wraps his coat around his body for a blanket. Around us, other families are falling into sleep.

“Here, lie down next to me,” he says. I get down on the floor beside my father and lie underneath his coat. He waits until I’ve stopped moving before he closes his eyes. I feel the muscles in his body relax.

“Father?” I say. “We are going to Texas, aren’t we?”

“Yes, in the morning,” he mumbles. He shifts his place on the floor, turning over onto his side.

“And it won’t be like before? It will be different, like you said?”

“Yes, it will all be different. You will see.”

From the floor, I could see out the window. The moon was bright and full, the light of it shone through into the room. It was quiet except for the hum of the sleeping bodies.

“And mother, she would be proud?” I ask, looking over at his face. His eyes are closed but I know he is still listening. He pulls on the coat so that it’s touching our necks. Even though it is hot inside the house I do not move away. “Father?”

“Yes, yes,” he says, sighing deeply. “But you must sleep now, before the light comes. We must sleep.”

My mother loved the water. In Veracruz on the days my mother washed, I’d follow her to the river. I’d watch and wait as she’d rubbed the clothes against the rocks and then rinse them in the water. When she was finished the two of us would go swimming, the cold water would tingle our skin and our faces would flush from the excitement of it. Those were the best days, the days when we went to the river.

In Huatenco you could not swim in the water, everywhere there were people and the water was always the color of mud and filled with trash.

“Son, it’s time, wake up.”

My father shakes me and the first thing I notice upon opening my eyes is that it is still dark out. From the window I can still see the round shape of the moon. It is not even morning.

My back aches from sleeping on the floor and I try to stretch as I sit up. My father tells me that we have to hurry and he starts putting things in the two packs that we own. Around me, other people are starting to get up as well. Everyone is rushing, to be the first ones ready.

A man opens the door and yells at us to hurry up. It is another Coyote. He is a large man, tall and stocky, and he is smoking a cigarette. With squinted eyes I watch as he flicks ash on the floor. The smoke fills the room, making my throat itchy as I breathe it in. “Five more minutes or we’re leaving without you, whether you’ve paid or not.”

“Come on,” my father says. I can tell by his eyes that he did not sleep, they are rimmed with pink and watery. He zips up

The comma after “swimming” creates another comma splice. Should we repair this with a period or a semi-colon or STET?

A comma splice also occurs after “water.” Repair with a period or semi-colon or STET?

The comma after “rushing” is unnecessary. Delete? Or is this a rhetorical pause, a kind of beat?

The comma after “not sleep” creates another comma splice? Repair? If so, how? Period, em dash, semi-colon?



our packs and stands up. "Grab your coat, we have to go," he says, and I follow him out."

Outside there is a pickup truck. One of the men points to it and we start to move. It is a small truck, too small for all of us to climb into, but we do so anyway. There is another family with us and a group of teenage boys. It is too small for all of us, so I sit in my father's lap and hold onto his body for stability. The truck shakes as it moves and I try not to look at the other people. Instead, I look up at the sky and the stars and I focus on what's above than what's around me, because it is cramped and my body hurts from the floor. I look up at the sky and I am eating mangoes outside on our back stoop, or I am lying on the rocks by our river after fishing. I look up at the sky and all I see are stars and I am everywhere except for here where it is hot and my body aches and the drive already feels like forever. I close my eyes.

We drive for hours. When I wake I rub my eyes and turn to my father.

"How long has it been?"

"I don't know, but we are almost there, I think," he says.

He is right, for it does not take long before the truck slows down and then stops. The men from the truck get out and one of them, the one with the moustache, orders us to get off. As we step off I see that we have driven to a river.

"We are going to have to cross," my father says. "Here, hold my hand."

The men tell us that the truck to Houston is waiting across the river. Some of the others start to take off their shirts and wrap what few belongings they have in them to keep from getting wet. Those with nothing take off their clothes and stand in their underwear, holding their shirts and jeans, waiting for instruction.

The Coyotes give us car tires to float on as we swim. We put our wrapped belongings on top of the tires and hold onto them as we make our way across. Once we make it on the other side there is another Coyote who takes our tires and forces us to give him more money. My father is not prepared for this.

"We have already paid them," he tells the man, pointing across the river. "The rest is for when we get there."

The man tells us that he will leave us if we do not pay him. My father has no choice, and he takes the bills from breast pocket, all that he has left, and gives it to the man.

After he counts it, he points to another truck. My father pushes me along and the two of us walk towards it.

"Do you think we should just go back?" I ask my father, knowing that there is no more money.

"There is nothing there for us. Not anymore."

"But what are we going to do now?"

"We keep going," he says, taking hold of my hand once more. He pushes me along and together the two of us walk towards the others while carrying our belongings.

The night before she disappeared my mother came to me. I could not sleep and I felt her presence standing in the doorway, watching me. I looked up and saw her. She was smiling.

According to <[www.m-w.com](http://www.m-w.com)> "pick-up" is one word. We made the change.

We wondered if you could recast this sentence slightly. "My father had no choice, and he takes bills from his breast pocket, all that he has left, and gives it to the man"?



“Do you want to come with me?” she asked. “I am going swimming.”

“But where?” I asked. “There is nowhere to swim here.”

“I’ve found a place,” she said. “It is just like at home. I want to go and see what it is like at night. Will you come with me?”

“Where is it? Is it far?”

“No, but you have to get up if you want to come.”

She stood in the doorway waiting for me, but I did not get up. Even though I couldn’t sleep my body was tired.

“Can we go tomorrow instead?” I asked.

“Okay, my love,” she said. She walked over and kissed my forehead. I closed my eyes as I heard her leave the room.

The next morning I woke up and she was not there. She did not come home that day or the day after. She did not come home again.

My father and I walk until we see a second truck, this one larger. My father tells me this one is an old Pagosa refrigerator truck, used to transport large amounts of fruits and vegetables. He says that this is the last truck, the one that will take us into Houston.

“It will be very cold inside so you will need your jacket,” he says. He takes it out of the bag and hands it to me. It is still damp from the river.

When we reach the truck there are more of us than before, I am not able to count them. We all huddle together, afraid to be separated and stand out. There are also more men, at least five Coyotes and all are standing around ordering directions. One points to the back of the truck and we begin to form a line. One by one we climb up into the truck. There are no steps or a ramp, which makes getting in difficult for the ones who are older. When one of the Coyotes sees that this is holding up the line, he goes and grabs a couple of tires for makeshift steps.

We are two of the last to get on. It is dark inside, so dark that even squinting it is still hard to see my hands, much less the others traveling in the trailer with me or even where to walk. It is like night in here.

“I don’t know where to go, I can’t see,” I tell my father.

“Don’t worry, your eyes will get used to it,” he says, pushing me along. I keep walking, hoping to find a place to sit. It doesn’t take long for me to feel the heat surrounding us. I move my head around to try to feel air from the vents but there isn’t any.

“It’s hot,” I say, wiping my forehead with the palm of my hand. Sweat is already running down my face, my back. I feel the beads of it trickling down.

“Here, sit down,” he says, ignoring me. “Quickly now, before the truck moves.”

I carry these things with me—the scent of her, always smelling of fruit, fresh mangoes and pineapple, or of fried plantains. I remember the acne on her jaw line, the little bumps that she always rubbed with her hands when she worried. I remember the gap she had between her front teeth, the reason as to why she always smiled with her mouth closed. I remember the sound of her laugh when I told her jokes I’d heard from the

The comma after “before” creates a comma splice. STET or replace with a period, semi-colon, or em-dash?

We inserted a comma after “ramp” (nonrestrictive clause).



boys at school. I remember the warmth of her body when she hugged me.

If I had known what was going to happen I would have paid more attention to the way these things felt. I would have relished in the moments between us. I would have told myself to remember her, to remember everything.

We talk in the dark, each of us telling our story. There are people from all across Mexico, but wherever we've come from we're here together for the same reason. All of us are hoping for something better. Filled with dreams we boarded the truck, hoping it would be our answer.

I listen to their stories and wait for the time to tell our own. My father doesn't speak. I open my mouth to say something, but I can't think of where to begin. I don't know where our journey started. Was it the morning we left? Or was it that night my mother had stood in my doorway, asking me to go swim with her in the river? I remember she was wearing her yellow dress. I had not thought of it until now. I looked at her and she had smiled.

Was it that moment or did my journey start long before? Was it the nights when we ate only tortillas for supper because there was no work? Was it when my father stopped smiling and instead there was only the hard, wrinkled face of a man who'd put himself through too much? I cannot find the beginning but I feel as if this journey has always been, lasting long before I can remember.

I do not know the start but I know the end. It will be when this trailer stops and the door has opened and I have seen the sun.

The mind cannot remember everything, it picks and chooses. Sometimes I find myself already forgetting.

I'm afraid one day I won't remember the smell of her on Sunday mornings, the smell of musky vanilla and coffee. There are so many things, and every day a little more of it gets forgotten.

Whether I'm aware of it or not, a piece of her starts to disappear.

I'm afraid one day I'll wake up and it'll be as if I never knew her at all.

It does not take long for us to realize that something is wrong. After a few miles the air conditioner still has not been turned on, and the heat is unbearable. My shirt is already soaked through from sweat and it is hard to breathe.

"How long has it been?" a woman asks. I try to place the voice but I can't remember. There are too many stories, too many people with similar tragedies.

"Maybe ten minutes. Fifteen?" a man's voice answers.

"I can't breathe it's so hot," the woman says, and no one else speaks. "Why is there no air? Someone should do something. It can't be like this the whole way."

"She's right," I whisper to my father.

"What are we going to do, tell him to stop? There is nothing

We removed the comma after "from" (otherwise, we'd need to insert one after "but" that follows "Mexico"). Okay?

We inserted a comma after "something" (two independent clauses).

We replaced the comma after "dress" with a period to avoid the comma splice. Okay?

The comma after "everything" creates a comma splice. Replace with period, em-dash, semi-colon or STET?



we can do but wait and hope the air will come,” he says. He takes hold of my hand once again and it is clammy, warm. “Hush now, be quiet and save your energy. Close your eyes and think of something else.”

There is one memory I have not forgotten.

We were at the market and I had gotten bored with following my mother around as she shopped. It was hot and I was tired of walking. I walked down the streets watching people buy from the vendors. A group of street kids selling chicles, chewing gum, asked me if I’d buy any but I kept walking. I passed another vendor selling histories, and I stared at the pocket-size comics on display.

After awhile I began to look for my mother. My eyes searched around the market but all the women looked the same. None of them looked like her.

By the time I finally found her, it was hours later. I was in tears, sobbing as I told her about how I didn’t mean to wander off. She had leaned down and wrapped her arms around me while I cried.

Even now, I remember her warmth as I cried into her. I remember the smell of her skin and the feel of the fabric scratching against my cheek. It is things like this that I remember, little pieces of her that stick in my mind.

People are becoming frantic. Sweat pours from our bodies, our skin is slick with it. There is no air but only the stench of the other bodies next to us. My head starts to spin. It hurts to breathe, my lungs feel as if they’re closing up. People on the truck are getting suck from the heat, and I listen to the sounds of retching. The sound echoes through the metal walls of the truck as it bumps along.

It smells like sweat and vomit everywhere. It is so hard to breathe, there is no air. How can there be no air?

There is shouting. A woman is sobbing. She’s in hysterics. She is shouting for something to be done, for one of us to do something, but what? We are trapped inside. A group of men start to bang on the truck, they shout for the driver to stop, they bang and bang and it sounds like the clanging of drums but still he can’t hear us. He keeps driving. There is nothing left for us to do.

My father never says her name. He never speaks of her. I do not ask him why.

He cries randomly, little bursts of grief at the kitchen table, or when we are out at the market. He never tells me what sparks the tears.

My father cries, and each time I am reminded of a time when walking home I found a dog lying on the side of the road. A group of kids were standing around it, kicking and hitting it with sticks.

I had asked them what they were doing. “He’s already dead,” one of them, the tallest and oldest, said to me. “What does it matter now?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But how do you know?”

The comma after “our bodies” creates another comma splice? STET or a suggestion for fixing it?

We removed the comma after “when”. Otherwise, we’d have to insert one after “home” too. Okay?



I stood there watching all of them kick the dog repeatedly. I watched as its blood trickled out, staining the dirt path. I watched the dog lying there, and I had done nothing.

Every time I have thought of that afternoon I have felt the pain of it inside me, rising up in my chest and then in my throat, making it ache. My father does not say my mother's name and I know why. To speak means to acknowledge it, to admit that there is such pain in the world, such grief. And what is there to do against it? What is there to do but keep walking?

Neither of us speak now because we didn't speak then, when it could have meant something, when it could have meant a difference.

"I have to close my eyes," my father says. "I am so tired, I have to rest. You get up and try with the others. Maybe he will notice."

I say nothing as he lays there, his eyes closed but his mouth open, trying to breathe in the rancid air. He doesn't bother to wipe his face or even move.

I stand up and walk towards the voices of the other men. My hands trace the sides of the wall, feeling in the dark for a latch or a knob that could open the trailer door, but there is only the smooth, metal interior of the trailer. I move farther and farther along the walls, stepping over others, and as I walk I slowly begin to understand that there is no opening from the inside, there is no way out.

Those of us who are able continue banging the walls of the trailer, trying to get the driver's attention. We stop after a moment and wait for a response. We listen as the noise reverberates against the walls, hearing the sounds we made long after we've stopped. Still we are quiet, waiting until there is nothing but the steady hum of the engine pulling us along and the raspy breathing of those struggling for air, their throats dry from the heat.

When the banging doesn't work we gather together to tip over the trailer. We throw ourselves against the walls, trying to knock it down. Those who aren't able to stand hit the walls with their fists. Some cry out for the truck to stop.

But he does not stop. He refuses to listen. Yet we bang and shout. Still, we continue to try, with whatever strength we have we try.

How can a man ignore the cry of another? He hears us, he must hear us, but why won't he stop? Is it so easy to pretend? How can he pretend that we do not exist, that we aren't here shouting with every breath within us for him to do one simple thing? Is it so easy to pretend? How can it be so easy?

"It is not good," one of the men says. He crouches back down. "He does not want to hear."

Most of the men stop after this. They are tired. It is too much effort to try when it is useless. How can you make someone hear you when they have chosen not to? We all stop and rest, trying to gather whatever energy is left.

I stop too. But then there is shouting again. People are saying that they are able to feel air, that the driver has turned on the air conditioning. They can feel the cool breeze of it, however faint,



coming from up above. People start to gather, pushing each other, struggling to feel the air.

I make my way back to where my father is. I squat down to where he lies and I lean over, close enough to see that his eyes are still closed. “Father, can you hear them? They are saying there is air now. We have to get up to where the vents are.” I wait for his response but there is nothing. My father does not move. He does not speak. He does not even open his eyes.

Shortly after the air is turned on, the truck slows down and then stops. Everyone inside is quiet, and the only sound is the collective, raspy breathing of everyone inside.

“Maybe we are there,” whispers a man’s voice near me. “We have made it, we are finally there.”

A door slams shut and there are footsteps walking towards the back of the truck. There are curses. No one says a word as the footsteps move closer.

When the doors are opened, it is the driver looking back at us. He stares at us all, holding up a flashlight to look into our faces. “What the hell?” he says, but before he is able to fully understand what has happened, men and women are standing up and trying to get out of the van. It is madness as men push themselves towards the door and jump off the truck into the darkness, half-naked and shouting wildly. Most of us start to run but some stay by the trailer, falling down onto the dirt, resting, breathing in the fresh but humid air. There are the shrill sounds of women screaming. I don’t move but watch as men hobble off into the dark, stopping once they’ve gotten far enough away to put on pants, while others carry their clothes as they run. Their cries sound like the free howl of a coyote, and I listen as the noise of it fills the night.

I am the last to get out of the truck. Once out I see the driver, he is on the ground. He sees me and starts to get up but makes a grunting sound and stops. He touches the side of his ribcage.

“Damn them,” he says. I take a few steps closer and I can see the blood. The driver grunts again. “Aren’t you going to run with the others?” the driver says to me. I stand still, afraid to move. I look back at the opening of the trailer to where my father is. I don’t know where to go.

“You going to stay here with me? They’ll be coming soon, you know, for all of us. Either way.”

I look again towards the trailer. It’s too dark to see inside but I don’t need light to know what’s there.

“What are you going to do?” he asks.

I run.

My father is still inside, but I have to leave him. I have no choice if I want to survive.

Each step burns. Where are my shoes? I left them in the trailer with my shirt, the only clothes I have now gone. The ground burns my feet and the pain is unbearable, but I keep running, as quick as I can, so that the pain in each foot lasts only a moment and nothing more.

I run until I do not see the truck anymore. I run until the road is gone and there is only me and the earth and the sky.

The comma after “driver” creates a comma splice. STET or suggestions for fixing it?



There is only desert.

My legs ache. My throat burns from the dryness of it. I have walked for miles and everywhere it is the same. I don't know how much longer I can go.

The sun is rising amidst a cloudless sky and I can feel the heat of it everywhere.

My body is calling for me to rest, but I must keep going. For my father I must keep going.

Then, in the distance, I see her. She calls to me, telling me to come. She shouts for me to hurry up.

She knew I would come back to her, she says. She knew I would come.

I call out for her to wait, that I need to rest. My legs are tired and my body aches. "Wait for me," I shout.

"Come on," she calls, waving to me. I watch her as she starts to run. I start running too, but my body can't sustain itself, my energy has been drained, and it takes only a few moments before my legs buckle and I'm lying on the ground with my face in the dirt, choking on the dry air.

"You are going too fast, I can't keep up," I say.

I force my body to stand. I start to run again. The sun is hot. My whole body burns from the heat. My legs feel the pain of each step but I continue running. Now I don't know how to stop.

She calls to me in the distance. I see her waiting underneath the shade of a group of trees. She is wearing the yellow dress, the one she wore the last time I saw her. She is not far now. It will not be much longer before I'm there.

"Mother, wait up, I'm coming."

I am almost there. I call out to her in the desert. I see the shape of her mouth moving, saying something to me but I can't hear anymore. I run faster, so fast that my feet don't even feel the ground. It is only a matter of time before I will reach the trees where we will sit underneath their shade and I will once again feel the warmth of her and everything I have forgotten will come back. I will keep running towards those trees. I will keep moving. It won't be long now, I say to myself. I will be there soon. □

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