

TITLE: Coyote Kisses

SUB-CATEGORY: Short story (fiction)

NAME OF ARTIST: Jeanne Mullins

Coyote Kisses

“I killed my daughter... my beautiful Jessica... is dead. Because of me.”

Carolyn paused like she did every time she gave this speech. She didn't pause for effect although she knew the audience was impacted because of the collective hush that silenced their chatter.

She didn't pause for shock value even though any talk of female infanticide was shocking. Less than one percent of all child murders were committed by women.

She paused for control – not for control over her listeners – but for over her own body functions, like breathing, swallowing, and balance.

When she first started giving these court-mandated speeches six months ago, she thought she could stand out here – alone—in front of thousands of people and remain calm. But she found she couldn't do it without an artifact, a small piece of Jessica. She knew that the naysayers—of her lifestyle, of her hand in the killing—believed that dragging out a hairbrush full of blond baby hairs was a showman's attempt at pity. They were wrong.

She needed to touch the silky strands of hair between her fingers—hair that contained Jessica's DNA—to allow for air to be pumped back into her lungs so she could breathe without gasping.

“**And** while it's true that I did not inflict the fatal blow, according to a court of law, I was complicit. You see it was the *coyotes*. They killed her, tore her flesh from her bones and then shared her like she was a Sunday picnic. Cause of death: exsanguination. Jessica died—and you must indulge me here, I will use her name often during this speech, I think I counted twelve times—BECAUSE I chose to stay in an abusive relationship. For that I am guilty.”

Carolyn thanked the women for coming to hear her testimony although she knew most of them came because they were ordered to do so. By a court of law. By conditions of a safe house

for abused women and children. But for whatever reason they were here— she suspected it had something to do with the fact that they knew deep down they too had placed their children in the line of fire – she would not lay a guilt trip on them. They were her sisters-in-arms.

“**Jessica’s** father, Bobby, was abusive. But it wasn’t until the day she died that he turned his fists on her. It didn’t matter though because Jessica still spent her time in the company of abuse. Abuse is not a pleasant companion. Even when it goes on hiatus: And even when it’s not accompanied by direct violence. Sometimes the abuse is camouflaged. Sometimes, you get so confused you misread overprotection and forced isolation for love. I know I did. I thought we’d had good weeks, sometimes as many as ten in a row. But in hindsight, you could see they really weren’t good weeks—not in a psychologically-healthy way—but in a cabin-in-the woods kind of way. I convinced myself that if he would just stay sober, he would be a good father. Life would be normal. But I am here to tell you that I was wrong. Do you hear me? Once a man hits you, he will never—and I repeat—NEVER—make a good father. The fact that he never made a good boyfriend or husband should tip you off. But it doesn’t. So we wait for him to change. And he will change. For the worse.”

Carolyn paused and sipped a glass of water. This pause is planned—deliberate in its placement in the speech. This is where the audience must ponder their own predicament. But Carolyn knew this was a stupid time for a break—there wasn’t going to be one woman in the audience, as of yet, that was capable of making the leap from coyote attack to domestic violence. But this was what Diane Westchester, publicist for WAVE (Women against Violence Everywhere), wanted: A strategically placed segment in the speech that warned women to flee their abusers. Before it’s too late. But what Diane Westchester, a college-educated woman with good taste in men, didn’t know was that it was already too late. Someone will die tonight; their fate already sealed. But Carolyn must do whatever WAVE wants—they’re running the show. WAVE worked with the courts to get her a lighter sentence. In exchange for no jail time Carolyn must give two years worth of community service work. These speeches were part of the

agreement. Carolyn didn't mind. She had nothing else to do. Carolyn took another sip of water and grasped the microphone tighter.

“**By** worse, I mean that one day he will turn his anger toward your child. Then you will be forced—and I say forced because I believe that an internal force, be it God, or some as of yet-unnamed being— will move you to action. As it did to me. On the night of April 27, 2016, my husband turned his fists on his child. My Jessica. And do you know what ungodly act she performed? What was so despicable that it would move a grown man to strike a child— no, swat a thirty-pound child across the room as though she were a wasp that had just stung his most private parts? My Jessica, my darling three-year-old said— in her big girl voice for she had just started to speak in full sentences— “Can Mommy finish reading *Winnie-the-Pooh* before she starts your dinner?” That was it. Someone other than *he* wanted to be first. Unspeakable! While her tiny body was being hurled through the air, my mind responded with an involuntary primitive reflex. I picked up the first thing I saw – it was a baseball bat lying next to the night stand – and hit him with it. Some say more like pummeled him; at least five times. I don't know. I didn't stop until I heard Jessica say, ‘Mommy, I think Daddy's hurt.’ She was right. He was hurt. Bloodied and broken but still breathing. Barely. I didn't care. I knew I had to keep Jessica safe. I swept her up and we piled into the car. Then we drove away into the night. The naysayers say I left him to die. I say I left so Jessica and I could live.”

Carolyn stopped to finger the hairbrush. She needed to hold onto a lock of hair. She knew where the story was headed and how much time she had left before she'd talk about the gruesome details of the attack. She had to do it. That's why they came: To hear about the little girl who was kissed to death by coyotes.

“**I** had a plan, and I admit now it wasn't a very good one—but when you're pumped up on adrenaline and operating in *Fight or Flight* mode—options were limited. We headed to the mountaintops. That's where my mom always said to go when you were in trouble. Mainly because we lived near a river and heading to higher ground was a sensible solution when you

lived in a flood zone. I ran into a Walmart and grabbed some supplies. We were at a campsite before dark. I threw together a small fire and we roasted marshmallows. Normal stuff campers do.”

Carolyn stopped talking briefly to unhinge the microphone. She always wavered here—hoping one day she would stop reading the teleprompter and tell the story in her own words. Jessica’s life wasn’t scripted. But for today, she continued to read the cue cards.

“**Then** it was bedtime.” Carolyn stiffened. “And Jessica wanted me to read her a bedtime story. She wanted *Winnie-the-Pooh*. I told her I hadn’t brought any books with me but she wasn’t accepting my answer. Jessica didn’t have many tantrums. But tonight she was inconsolable. I went outside and poked around by the fire. Finally, after about five minutes she stopped crying.”

Carolyn moved closer to the front of the stage. Two men came from behind the stage and moved the podium off to the right side. The lights dimmed slightly giving the illusion that the sun was setting. Ambient background noises – crickets, waterfalls, birds – filtered into the auditorium. Carolyn hated all this show biz glitz – and it got worse from this point on – but she was contractually bound to continue.

“**Next** I zipped Jessica into the thermal sleeping bag and gave her a goodnight kiss, just like I did every night. Then my dear sweet Jessica, my baby doll, panicked. She began to cry again with so much force it gave her the hiccups. In between cries, she unzipped the sleeping bag, whimpering, ‘I want my daddy to kiss me night-night. Daddy always kisses me night-night.’ I tried to explain to her that her daddy couldn’t kiss her goodnight. But she wouldn’t listen. Because—and I found this out later— my dear sweet Jessica was suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. I know it seemed unbelievable that a three-year-old child could suffer from such a severe medical condition, but it was true. Because of the abuse. I found out later that a child can get PTSD just by being exposed to violence in the home, even if she herself was not being physically abused. It’s sort of like being exposed to second-hand smoke – the ramifications

can be just as debilitating. I'm not telling you all this to evoke sympathy or to offer an excuse for what I did. I am telling you because it's the truth, and it can happen to your child."

The lights in the theater dimmed. The audience was seated in total darkness. A huge photograph of Jessica popped onto the projection screen. She was blowing out three birthday candles on a cake decorated with *Winne-the-Pooh* characters.

"**This** beautiful child looks happy. But she was slowly being destroyed. Day by day, a little more of her brain weakened. She lacked the capacity—not just because of her age but also because of the deterioration of critical thinking areas of her brain—to rationalize her behavior. She was delusional when she cried, 'I want the coyotes to kiss me night-night.' We knew they were in the woods. We could hear them gently howling in the back ground. And yes, despite what the naysayers will have you believe, it happened just as I claimed. Jessica was sitting on top of the sleeping back when I turned my back to untie my sneakers and wiggle out of my pants. When my pants were down to my knees, she opened the flap of the tent and fled. One moment was all it took. Before I managed to stand up and regain my balance, she'd vanished into the night. We didn't find her until the next morning."

The photograph on the screen changed and the audience looked at a different picture of Jessica. Here she was ripped open, gutted, and mangled. It was a picture no mother should ever have to add to her scrapbook.

"**This** is what remained of my baby; my Jessica. She was a piece of torn fuselage, wreckage that was not salvageable. Beyond recognition was how they described her remains. When I say I killed my daughter, what I meant to say was that I was complicit in her death. She died on my watch. I know you're probably all wondering why I didn't call for help, or go after her myself. I did. I ran blindly in the dark, trying to follow her. But I truly have no idea how she got so deep into the woods in a manner of seconds. The naysayers blame it on alcohol. It's true I did have a Coors Light. But believe me when I tell you I wasn't inebriated. You sober up quick when your child goes missing. Others blame it on the Park Rangers. But it's not their fault. How

many “*the dingo ate my baby*” stories can you believe? And you can’t blame the police either. Once they found I had bludgeoned my husband hours before, they were almost sure the same fate had befallen Jessica. Statistics, they claimed, were on their side. And I wasn’t a credible witness. To them I was a disoriented, possibly homicidal wife who claimed her three-year-old daughter ran out into the night so that a coyote could kiss her goodnight. I wouldn’t have believed me either.

The screen flashes and another photo of Jessica emerged. This time she’s sitting on her bed, snuggling a plush toy— a stuffed coyote about five inches big. She’s nuzzling her face nose to nose with the stuffed animal.

“**Every** night before Jessica went to sleep, she’d kiss her stuffed coyote. Without fail. It was a ritual. I should’ve known that she needed to stick to her routine. She craved the stability, the quietness, and the steadfast love of a warm body, especially one she didn’t perceive as threatening. She believed, my sweet Jessica believed, she would find more comfort, more unconditional love from a furry critter than in the crook of her mother’s arms.”

Carolyn paused. The lights raised up a notch, giving the effect of a new dawn. Her voice cracked, like a violin needing a tune.

“**Ladies** and gentlemen, if you take away nothing else from this speech, let it be this one notion— violence of any kind, be it verbal or physical; first hand or second hand—is warping your child. The damage is being inflicted, even if you can’t see it. Other people see it and they wonder why you stay.”

The lights were restored to normal. The screen receded, and the podium moved back to the middle of the stage. Carolyn re-attached the microphone.

“**Any** questions?” There were dozens, it appeared. But Diane only allowed time for five, which she had strategically placed throughout the audience. Diane felt that if the presentation wrapped up quickly the women— still tormented by the grotesque images of Jessica – would run straight home to their kids. God-willing, at least one of them would be moved to action.

Carolyn wasn't so sure. She often questioned Diane's over-zealous methods. She felt that the speech was too over the top and the photos made the whole presentation too theatrical. Carolyn also fretted that some women might misinterpret the message. Instead of worrying about PTSD and its associated maladies, some women probably went home and foolishly chucked Barney the dinosaur and all the other plush animals into the trash.

If Carolyn were running the show, she'd have a more intimate discussion with a smaller group of women and tackle domestic violence head-on. But what did she know? She's a convicted felon with a dead daughter.