

THE COYOTE AND THE SNAKE

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. ROCKY DESERT HIGHWAY -- DAY

Sun. Heat shimmers. An occasional vehicle SWISHES by.

ELROY, a 15-year-old runaway in street clothes and carrying a daypack, peeks out from behind roadside rocks. When the blacktop mirage swallows the last visible car, he dashes across the road, dives into cover.

He reaches for his pack: there's no water bottle.

ELROY

Oh man.

A plastic bottle of water lays in the middle of the road.

Elroy gets set to go back for it. He checks for traffic --

An 18-wheeler HURTLES past, turns the bottled water into roadkill.

Elroy gives it up. He trudges away into the desert.

EXT. ROCKY DESERT -- DAY

It's a big desert. That tiny speck is Elroy.

EXT. DESERT -- DUSK

Elroy fit to drop. He picks a spot, sits. He looks uncomfortable.

A RATTLE!

He scrambles to the top of a boulder. Things slither in the shadows. Elroy stands, clutches his pack.

A coyote HOWLS. Elroy spins round in panic and confusion. He sees a thin column of smoke rising into the evening sky.

EXT. LOG CABIN (FEMALE HOGAN) -- DUSK

In the 'front yard', TOM, a 40-ish Navajo, chops wood.

Elroy watches from cover, takes in the scene: A dirt track, a pickup. A vegetable patch. Smoke from the chimney, light from the doorway.

TOM
(calls)

Mary!

MARY, mid-thirties, a white woman in her own interpretation of Native American dress, appears in the doorway.

TOM (CONT)
Better break out the best china.
There's company to dinner.

Mary goes back inside. Tom plants the ax in the chopping block.

TOM (CONT)
Yeah, I know you're out there.
You might as well come on in.

Elroy edges forward.

TOM (CONT)
The name's Tom. And that there
was Mary. How should I call you?

ELROY
Elroy.

TOM
You been out there all day?

ELROY
Yes sir.

TOM
Walking all day in the desert
will fry your brains, Elroy.

Tom gathers an armful of split logs, heads for the cabin.

TOM (CONT)
You could make yourself useful
and fetch in some more of those
logs if it's not too much trouble.

Elroy takes the hint.

INT. LOG CABIN -- NIGHT

Indoor camping: Elroy sits at a rough table lit by a hanging gas lantern. Tom takes a second round of beers from a cooler and joins him. Mary serves food on paper plates. They eat.

TOM

Where you from, Elroy?

ELROY

You know. Back east.

TOM

You wanna be more specific?

ELROY

Do I have to?

TOM

OK, no, I guess you don't. Where you headed?

ELROY

Los Angeles.

TOM

Well, hell, why not? You have to be going somewhere.

Outside, a coyote YAMMERS. Elroy starts.

ELROY

What is that? I heard it before.

TOM

Elroy, you don't watch enough Discovery Channel. That's Coyote. Ma'ii. My spirit animal.

ELROY

Your 'spirit animal'? You believe that?

TOM

You don't?

The COYOTE again. Tom HOWLS in unison. Elroy snickers.

TOM (CONT)

Don't mistake this for a game, son. There's a lot of things out there can kill a man. This desert belongs to Coyote, and you don't want to piss him off.

ELROY

Wow, yeah, OK, I'm sorry. I don't mean no disrespect. But this is... I'm not used to this.

(he indicates Mary,
drops his voice)

How about... Does she speak?

MARY

Sure -- when I have something to say.

ELROY

So, you have an animal too?

MARY

Oh yeah.

[FLASH INSERT]

A coiled rattler.

[END INSERT -- BACK TO SCENE]

ELROY

OK, you don't have to tell me. But what about me? I should have an animal too, right?

TOM

You don't get off the hook just because you're white, son.

MARY

Case in point.

TOM

Mary's from the same place as you.

MARY

He means back east.

ELROY

Yeah? So how you two, you know,
get together?

MARY

He was on a raiding party to the
nearest town. Grabbed the
best-looking white woman he could
see, drug me back here. Worked out
pretty good.

ELROY

You people are weird.

TOM

So what would be normal for you?

ELROY

You know, towns, cars, people...

TOM

Then how come we find you stumbling
around out here in the desert?

ELROY

Yeah, well... it's a long story.

TOM

Yeah, well. The TV's in the shop
so we could use a good long story
right about now.

ELROY

OK... so, uh, I met this guy...

TOM

Uh-huh.

ELROY

This was back in Amarillo...

TOM

Something stuck in your craw there, Elroy? Something you're having trouble spitting out?

ELROY

No. Why you think that?

TOM

You ask someone to tell their story, your biggest problem is usually getting them to shut up again. You're not exactly the quiet type and yet here you are choking on the first sentence.

ELROY

Maybe I'm not so clear on my story any more.

TOM

When's the last time you spoke to anyone?

[FLASH INSERT]

POV SHOT: Elroy comes out through a doorway into blinding sunlight.

[END INSERT -- BACK TO SCENE]

ELROY

This morning, early.

TOM

Who'd you speak to?

ELROY

Joe.

TOM

Joe. This the guy from Amarillo?

ELROY

Yeah.

TOM

What did you say to him?

[FLASHBACK]

SAME POV SHOT: Elroy exits the doorway. The blinding sunlight resolves into --

EXT. STORE, FRONT LOT -- DAY [FLASHBACK]

JOE (25, a smooth operator with movie star good looks; jeans, boots, white shirt and jacket) gets behind the wheel of the only car in the lot. He starts the engine, guns it.

Elroy breaks into a run. Joe grins, blows Elroy a kiss and locks the car doors.

ELROY

Joe! Where you going?

The rear wheels spit gravel. Elroy breathes dust.

[END FLASHBACK]

INT. LOG CABIN -- NIGHT

TOM

Where was he going?

ELROY

He didn't say. Away. Away from me.

TOM

Why would he do that?

ELROY

You tell me!

TOM

He was your friend?

ELROY

Yes!

TOM

Then why would he run out on you like that?

ELROY

I don't know!

TOM

You don't know?

ELROY

No!

Tom waits.

ELROY (CONT)

All right, yes. I do know. It was because we'd just killed a guy.

TOM

You and Joe?

ELROY

Yeah.

TOM

How'd you come to do that?

ELROY

I don't know! Oh Jesus!

TOM

You were there, Elroy, You know what happened. Tell me.

ELROY

We were... robbing this store. Not a hold-up, just boosting stuff -- stupid crap, junk...

INT. STORE -- DAY (FLASHBACK)

Joe takes small items from the shelves, stuffs them inside Elroy's shirt. Elroy giggles.

ELROY (VO)

...The place was empty, no cameras, just the clerk.

JOE

It's a desert out there. Go get
us some water.

As Elroy heads to the back of the store, Joe approaches the teenaged
Native American CLERK.

JOE (CONT)

Hi! How you doing? Looks like
it's gonna be another hot one.

CLERK

Looks like.

JOE

That your car out front? The
white one?

CLERK

Why?

Elroy puts two bottles of water on the counter.

ELROY

Howdy!

The clerk turns towards Elroy. Joe pulls out a handgun, holds
it on the clerk.

JOE

Gimme the keys.

The clerk raises his hands...

ELROY

Joe??!

...reaches for something.

BANG! The clerk goes down, pulling an overhead shelf with him:
dust, promotional items, a short-barrelled shotgun.

ELROY (CONT)

Joe? Joe!? What you doing?

JOE

Get his keys.

Joe leans across the counter, dumps the cash register.

JOE (CONT)

You hear me? Get the keys. There,
on his belt.

Elroy gets behind the counter, hands Joe the clerk's keys.

JOE (CONT)

You in or out?
(Elroy looks blank)
Fine.

Joe stuffs bills in his pocket, grabs a handful of candy and exits the store. Elroy comes around the counter, picks up a bottle of water and follows -- out through the doorway into blinding sunlight.

[END FLASHBACK]

INT. LOG CABIN -- NIGHT

TOM

That'd make you an accomplice.

ELROY

Yeah.

TOM

In the eyes of the law.

MARY

It's a close-run thing.

Elroy hangs his head. A long silence.

TOM

You want the rest of those beans?
You mind?

Tom helps himself to the food on Elroy's plate.

TOM (CONT)

Come the morning, you'd be well
advised to follow that track
outside. It runs up into the

hills and about seven miles in you'll hit clean water and some shade. Rest up there for the heat of the day. Another twenty-some miles on, you'll hit blacktop and a diner unless you've missed your way. You have any money?

ELROY

Three bucks and change.

TOM

Well, go easy on your feet then, cause it's a long way to L.A. and you won't be riding no Greyhound for a while.

Mary, in a nightgown, slips behind a curtained-off sleeping area.

Tom turns down the lantern and follows her. After a moment, he pokes his head out:

TOM (CONT)

If you'd straighten the place up some, Mary'd take it kindly.

Elroy takes the paper plates to the woodburning stove. He watches them burn.

INT. LOG CABIN -- FIRST LIGHT

Elroy asleep in a chair at the cleared table. He comes awake, looks towards the curtained off area.

EXT. LOG CABIN -- FIRST LIGHT

Elroy exits the sleeping hogan, passes Tom's pickup. He gets into the vegetable patch, stoops, pulls a carrot.

A coyote HOWLS. Elroy turns. The coyote vanishes over a rise.

Elroy turns back to his breakfast-- but instead of the carrot, he holds a tuft of desert scrub. He blinks, looks up:

The vegetable patch is a wasteland of brush and weeds.

The hogan is a tumbledown ruin.

The pickup is a rusted out wreck.

Elroy stands, backs up. He finds the dirt track and stumble-runs away, towards the hills.

PAN from the receding Elroy to the derelict hogan.

FLASH INSERT -- A rattler.

Under the broken log walls, a body:

The late, unlamented Joe lies face up, an ax buried deep in his chest.

EXT. DESERT -- DAY

A coyote crests a rise, stands and silently watches Elroy head into the hills by the clear light of the new day.

THE END