

“It’s time for bed,” the old man announces before grabbing the remote control.

“It’s getting late.”

The three children don’t respond immediately. They sit frozen there, on the couch, their attention too invested in their cartoon program to be interrupted by their grandfather’s instructions.

The old man points the remote control at the television screen and presses down on the power button, motioning the device with a slight drop of his hand. The screen’s image quickly flickers and disappears into black without ceremony.

The room becomes dark, illuminated only partially by the distant light above the stairway leading to the children’s bedroom.

“Come on, kids. It’s nighttime.”

“Okay, papi” the children reply in unison. They each hop off their seats and march up the stairs toward the bathroom, shutting the door behind them.

The old man peers around the room, making sure that the children haven’t yet again left a big mess for him to clean up. Aside from a mess of paper with a few scribbles and an open crayon box on the table, the living room seems clean enough. With his inspection complete, he slowly climbs up the stairs and knocks on the bathroom door.

“Don’t take too long, it’s past eleven.”

Between a few giggles from the other side of the door, there’s a mumbled response.

“Yes-th, papi” says one of the children, mouthing the words carefully around her toothbrush.

A few moments later, the children are out of the bathroom and in their pajamas. The old man has just begun to tuck them in before one of them, Donny, speaks up.

“Grampa, can you tell us a story again, pleeeaaase?” he asks, raising his voice emphatically at the end of the sentence.

Donny’s older sister Jilly sits up and responds:

“But it should be a story we haven’t heard before.”

The old man chuckles.

“What about you Adam, would you like to hear a story?” he asks the little one he’s tucked in.

Adam, the youngest of his siblings, holds his blankets tightly up to his chin. He smiles and nods.

“Well, okay, let’s see... Once, there was a little boy who lived by a swamp. He alwa-“

“We’ve heard that one already, papi” interrupts Jilly. “We want a new story.”

“Alright, well, have I told the story of the man and the talking tree?”

“You told that one!” says Donny plaintively.

“There was a girl behind the tree!” Adam laughs.

“How about the tale of the shaggy dog?”

“Yes,” the children all declare in unison, with an unmistakable tone of annoyance.

“Please not that one again, papi” sighs Jilly.

The old man scratches his head and takes a few moments to think.

“Okay,” he says. “Here’s one for you. It’s a new story, I promise.”

Our story starts with a lone man wandering down a long, empty road.

The sun had only begun to rise above the mountains behind him, painting dark, jagged shadows on the dirt floor. The man’s own shadow stood in front of him, thin and elongated, stretching far toward the horizon and pointing forward along the road.

The man wasn’t sure where the road would lead, or how long it might stretch, or even how he found himself on this path. Aside from the last few steps he’d taken, his memory provided no answers to the mystery.

“Where am I,” he thought. “Who am I,” he pondered. “What am I doing here? Where am I going?”

There was no reply to these questions. There was no answer. There was only himself and the road, he thought, and he resolved to continue to walk it, to wander along its path. What else could he do?

The sun had grown with every passing minute, and as the sky’s colours transmuted from darker, reddish hues to a bright, brilliant blue, it became easier to spot the way ahead for the wanderer. There were curves down the road he could see, with occasional straight lines and twists and zigzags all along the path. The dirt floor at either side of the road would eventually change to grass, and to woods and rocky hills.

“Yes,” the wanderer said to himself. This is the right road, he thought. This is **his** road. This isn’t anyone else’s road but his own. He was sure of it—more sure of that than he’d been of anything else before.

And who was he before? The thought had again occurred to him that he doesn’t know who he is. How, exactly, was he sure that this is his road, if he didn’t even know his own name? How could he know any

of this if he didn't know where he came from? And how, for that matter, did he not know? With a short sigh he soon decided that it didn't matter. This is a good road—as good as any road—and he's walking it and that's that.

The sun continued its journey upward and the man's shadow began to shrink. At least an hour passed since he started, and the road had begun to cut through a grassy field. The change of scenery seemed nice to the wanderer, and the air was fresh and pleasant. Step by step, the man continued along the path, but at a livelier, brisker pace.

It wasn't long before, the wanderer noticed a pair of pointed, furry ears peeking out of the grass ahead of him, heading toward the road. Eventually a snout, too, peeked through the grass, followed by a head, a small canine body and a tail. The creature stood on the road and gazed at the man for a moment with inquisitive eyes. Then, it spoke.

"Hello there, friend!" it said, perking its ears and parting its lips to display a harlequin smile. "What are you doing here?"

The creature seems friendly enough, whatever it is, the man thought.

"I'm following this road" was the only answer the man could think of. "May I ask who you are?"

"I'm Coyote," the creature answered. "Nice to meet ya. Say, that looks to be a really nice road, and it'd be fun to see where it goes, especially with some company. Could I come with you?"

"Sure," said the wanderer, the eagerness in his voice surprising him. He realized that he did, in fact, want someone to talk to. "Yeah, that sounds good."

Coyote panted happily and sprinted to the wanderer's side—and together, they walked down the road.

"I don't get it," says Donny. "Why does the man not know anything?"

"You don't get it because you're too young," chides Jilly. "He's drunk."

"I'm almost eight," Donny says indignantly.

"You're seven," replies Jilly.

"Seven and three quarters," Donny corrects.

"Anyway he was probably drinking a lot of booze and he lost his memory," Jilly reasons.

Meanwhile, Adam giggles as he repeats the word "coyote" to himself.

Kai-yote-eee. Kai-yotee. Kai-yo-teeeee. The peculiar combination of sounds delights the boy.

“Children, hush,” says the old man. “If you let me continue, you’ll hear what happens next.”

A few more hours had passed as the wanderer and Coyote continued down the road. They each came up with their own theories about the road; where it might lead to, who built it, and how long it’s been here. Coyote said he thinks the road leads to a farm. And there, they could make new friends, play with the animals and eat.

“That must be where this road ends,” said Coyote.

The wanderer wasn’t convinced. Sure, the road *must* end somewhere eventually, but he didn’t think it would end with a farm. That isn’t where his road leads, he thought. Besides, the road is in pretty good shape. It’s paved, dark in colour and there aren’t any cracks or potholes to speak of. This isn’t the road for a tractor, he surmised. It’s a good road; it’s his road.

The wanderer hadn’t the faintest clue where the road would lead, but there were some destinations better than others.

Maybe, he thought, there’d be a mansion. That’d be a great place to be, wouldn’t it? Or maybe, the road would lead to a film shooting. That’d be fun. It could even lead to a rocket ship he could use to travel to space. He always wanted to go up there. He hoped he would.

Lost in thought, he would have missed the sounds of a bird’s caw if Coyote hadn’t heard it first. Coyote perked up his ears in response to the sound and excitedly turned to the wanderer.

“Do you hear that?” he asked. “Someone’s there. A bird! Yes, that’s what it is. It’s a bird! Why don’t we say hi?”

The wanderer, his attention returning to the outside world paused and listened.

“Huh? Well, yes, I guess. If it isn’t too far away. We shouldn’t stray from the road.”

The wanderer and Coyote followed the sound, which seemed to have been coming from a large shrub by the side of the road.

“Um, hello? Hello, are you there?” the man asked hesitantly.

The caws stopped, and a small black bird hopped out from underneath the shrub.

“Oh,” said the bird surprised. “Why, hello there. Can I help you?”

The wanderer thought for a moment, but didn’t know how to answer.

“We heard you,” barked Coyote playfully. “We heard you, and we thought you might be a friend.”

“We’re following this road,” the wanderer managed to say. “You’re welcome to join us if you like.”

“Where does the road go?” queried the bird.

“A farm,” Coyote said jubilantly. “Yes, definitely a farm!”

“Maybe,” the man said. “But we don’t know for sure. You can find out with us, if you come along.”

“Oh,” said the bird with pause. “Well... okay, if you don’t mind me coming along.”

“Not at all,” said the man. He could sense that the bird was a bit reserved—shy, even—but there was something else. Whatever it was, he wanted it to feel welcome.

“We’re more than happy to see you join us,” he said.

The bird nodded, and with another caw it extended its wings and flapped, quickly lifting off the ground before perching gently on the surprised man’s shoulder.

“I’m Crow,” said the bird. “Pleased to meet you.”

A few more hours passed as the three of them continued down the road, and the sun was now in plain view of their field of vision. The grassy fields at the sides of the road were long-gone, replaced by forests which appeared to grow denser, and denser still as they travelled forward.

The wanderer had quickly taken a liking to Crow, who, still on his shoulder, listened politely as he talked.

He hadn’t said much. Mostly, he talked about the road, where it might lead, and what he hoped to see by the end of it. Coyote, meanwhile, would sprint up ahead for a moment, stop and sniff the various plants by the side of the road, and sprint ahead again to maintain the pace of his companions.

As they continued along the road, the forest not only became thicker with trees and various grasses and bushes and shrubs, but also darker, and louder with sounds of various chirping insects and other animals deeper within the woods. It became so loud that, much to his annoyance, the wanderer could hardly hear himself as he tried to explain to Crow that the mansion at the end of the road should have an indoor swimming pool—with a diving board *and* a water slide.

Suddenly, a bark.

“I found you!” shouted Coyote happily. “I smelled you coming, and I found you!”

Crow and the wanderer turned their heads to see what the commotion was all about, and a hare emerged from the darkness of the woods.

“Yes, alright, you found me” said the hare, annoyed. “So what? There’s a lot of folks here—too many folks. You’re bound to find someone.”

The wanderer approached the small creature and knelt down on one knee.

“Is there... something you need?” asked the man.

“Something I need? Something I *need*? Boy, I’ll tell you what I need, and that’s less of you. The noise here, I tell you. There’s too much of it and I can’t stand it. What I need is quiet.”

The hare glared at Coyote and then at the wanderer. He was definitely much older than anyone the wanderer had met so far. Maybe, he thought, he’s even older than him! His face wore a permanent frown and his long ears waned.

“I’m sorry,” replied the man. “We won’t bother you.”

“Are there really a lot of friends in those woods?” asked Coyote.

“Friends?” scoffed the hare. “Why, they aren’t ‘friends’ if they don’t have the common courtesy to keep it down so others can relax in peace! Hooligans, the lot of them, they are!”

Coyote turned to the wanderer and Crow.

“We should go meet them! Go meet them all and play!”

“We should keep going,” replied the wanderer.

Coyote’s brow furrowed for a moment, as if to pout, but he quickly returned a smile.

“Well, I’m going, and you can meet me back here when you change your mind!” he said before running off into the woods.

“Hey!” shouted Crow. “Come back!”

The only response they could hear were a series of happy barks coming from the woods, each fainter and more distant than the last, until nothing else could be heard over the constant chirping of insects.

“He’s gone,” said the wanderer mournfully.

“Yeah, well, good riddance” grumbled the hare. “Now, I got a proposition for you folks. I’m not as spry as I used to be, see...”

The wanderer raised one eyebrow. Crow made a sound similar to a cough. An awkward cough.

“If you can carry me away from here, to somewhere that’s quiet, why, I’d appreciate it.”

The wanderer considered for a moment. The old hare was a bit bitter, and certainly no match for Coyote’s enthusiasm. But seeing Coyote leave left him feeling... well, odd... like he needed the company, even if it wasn’t the best kind of company. He thought for a moment, looked at Crow, and they nodded together.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s go.”

He held out his hands to the hare, who hopped on without ceremony. The man brought his hands back and held them to his chest, cradling the hare in his arms.

"Name's Hare, by the way," the aging lagomorph piped. "Don't get any ideas though, once we're out of the woods, we go our separate ways, okay?"

"That's fine," said the man.

And so the three followed the path of the road, leaving one behind.

"Maybe... we should..." started Crow, looking worried. "Maybe we should go back?"

"Shhh," chided the hare.

"But we need to keep going," said the man. "He'll be fine, I promise."

A few more hours passed, and as the sun continued to descend in front of them, the sky began to darken. Not much had happened since they left the woods. The wanderer and Crow bonded some more, joking about Coyote's hop when he was excited, as if the floor had sprung up from underneath him. Crow wondered if they would see him again, and the wanderer said he was sure they would. Hare, nestled in the wanderer's arms, had already fallen fast asleep. It was quiet now, and, not wanting to wake the grumpy guy, Crow spoke in a softer, hushed voice.

"Do you think it's quiet enough here?" Crow asked.

"It might be," the man replied. "Should I wake him and find out?"

Crow's head shook. "Better not, I don't think he'd want that."

"Okay then," said the wanderer.

They stopped.

The man took a brief moment to look behind him. It was getting dark fast, and the woods were already almost beneath the horizon. Whatever distance he's walked so far, he could only see a short portion of the whole path. What was beyond that, it was difficult to remember.

"I think this spot looks good," cawed Crow. Crow stood beside a small burrow by a pile of rocks to the side of the road.

"It looks empty, and it's likely warm. I think he'll like it here."

"Sounds good," said the wanderer. He quietly approached the hole and carefully rested Hare from his hands into the opening of the burrow.

"There, that should do it." he said, trailing off. A long, awkward pause followed.

They both looked at Hare, resting peacefully within his new home.

"We should get going," the man finally said.

Crow hopped from the man's arms back to his shoulder.

"Are you sure?" asked Crow. "Seems like maybe we should find a place to rest, too. It *is* getting rather dark."

The man, at first, didn't answer. He couldn't help but look at the sleeping hare. He looked... peaceful. Sure, Hare didn't have the sunniest disposition, but part of him didn't want to leave. Part of him knew that, if he walked away, he would never see Hare again, just like he'd never see Coyote again. He thought about how much he missed their company, and looked at Crow, worried where he'd be if she, too, strayed too far from the road... *His* road.

He paused, motionless, and didn't answer.

"What do you think?" asked Crow.

"The road," the man responded, shaking out of his trance. "We need to keep going, just a little further."

Crow didn't say anything. The wanderer stood on his feet, brushed off his knees, and continued walking along the path.

Another hour passed, and the sun approached the horizon. The sky was no longer bright blue, but instead a dark, sanguine colour. It was too dark for the wanderer to see much of anything behind or in front of him. He hummed a small tune together with Crow as Crow cawed. Crow's caws seemed weaker, and Crow yawned.

"I have to sleep."

"We're almost there," the man replied. "Just a little further, you'll see. We'll get there together." There was an unmistakable anxiety in his voice.

"I can't," Crow said softly. "I'm too tired. It's late. I can't go any further, I'm sorry."

The wanderer let out a small, pitiful sigh.

"But..." he sputtered.

"It's okay," Crow crooned. "It's been a wonderful day with you." Crow hopped off of the wanderer's shoulder and headed to a nearby patch of grass.

"...But I just need to rest." Crow shuffled into the grass and, finally, fell asleep.

The wanderer held his head in his hands and gasped. Why would Crow fall asleep now? When they're so close? Why would Crow...

The wanderer's thoughts escaped him, and he held his head toward the dying sun, before sadly looking back at Crow. Should he stay here with Crow? Should he sleep here? It's going to be hard to go alone, but...

He turned back toward the road.

"I have to keep going," he thought. "I'm almost there."

Placing one foot after the other, the wanderer reluctantly continued to walk the path of the road. It was harder now. His legs ached, and his head felt heavy upon his shoulders.

"Soon," he thought. "Soon."

The sun had begun to cross the horizon, and the sky grew darker... and darker. The man turned his head and tried to look back and spot Crow, but it was too dark to see anything behind him. That is, aside from his own faint shadow stretching across the road, fading into the blackness encroaching all around him.

His legs burned and his eyelids stubbornly refused to remain open. The wanderer crept over to the side of the road and sat wearily on the ground. With a short grumble, he carefully layed on his back and rested his hands on his chest, looking up into the sky. The sun completed its journey, receding fully behind the horizon. The pitch-black shadow of the landscape crept up, consuming the world in a dark and empty abyss. As it engulfed the wanderer, he let out a sigh.

He made it. He made it to the end of the road.

He closed his eyes, and fell asleep, finally, in peace.

As the old man finishes the story, he gently brushes his hand across Adam's head. The little one was fast asleep, tucked comfortably in his bed.

"I don't get it" whispers Donny. "What was at the end of the road?"

"It's obvious," whispers back Jilly. "It was nothing. There was nothing there and he went asleep, right Papi?"

"That's a dumb story if it was nothing," Donny pouts.

"Shush," replies the old man. "I'll let you figure it out yourself. Now go to bed, kids."

"It was totally nothing," whispers Jilly. "G'night Papi."

The old man tip-toes out of the bedroom, quietly closing the door behind him as he leaves. He heads downstairs and, after brewing a small cup of tea, sits on the couch, sorting through the various pieces of paper and crayons the children left behind. He takes a slow, delicate sip from his mug, and places the cup on a nearby table. With a stretch of his arms he yawns and, resting his head on the side of the couch, closes his eyes, falling asleep peacefully.