

The
Slow
Fix

stories

Ivan E. Coyote

THE SLOW FIX

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ARSENAL PULP PRESS

Suite 200, 341 Water Street

Vancouver, BC

Canada V6B 1B8

arsenalpulp.com

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the British Columbia Arts Council for its publishing program, and the Government of Canada (through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program) and the Government of British Columbia (through the Book Publishing Tax Credit Program) for its publishing activities.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance of characters to persons either living or deceased is purely coincidental.

Earlier versions of these stories appeared in *Xtra! West*

Text and cover design by Shyla Seller

Cover photograph by Dan Bushnell

Photograph of Ivan E. Coyote by Laura Sawchuk

Printed and bound in Canada on 100% post-consumer recycled paper

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication:

Coyote, Ivan E. (Ivan Elizabeth), 1969-

The slow fix / Ivan E. Coyote.

ISBN 978-1-55152-247-0

I. Title.

PS8555.O99S56 2008

C813'.6

C2008-904099-6

This book is dedicated to my grandmothers, Florence Daws and Patricia Cumming, for their strength and spirit. They just don't make them like they used to.

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By Any Other Name

I learned most of what I know about being a man from my Uncle Rob. Uncle Rob has never let the fact that I was declared female at birth get in the way of our male bonding, and I've always loved him best for it.

Uncle Rob taught me how to fish, drive a standard, light a match off of my front tooth, and open a beer with a Bic lighter. He taught me how to make a fist, turn into a skid, light a fire, and shoot a gun. He passed on to me everything he has ever managed to learn about women, and all the Zippo tricks he has ever been shown. He taught me how to tell a story, and how to hold my liquor. All the important stuff. Some of the family reckon I look more like my Uncle Rob than I do my own father, and everyone agrees I look just like my Dad.

Uncle Rob and Aunt Cathy flew to Vancouver last week, because Rob had an appointment with a fancy eye doctor. Whitehorse General Hospital is equipped to handle your basic medical tests and common ailments, but anything involving a specialist or an expensive machine requires a trip to the big city. Rob called me from the hotel and told me to round up the stray cousins and bring the girlfriend; he was taking us all out for dinner. Cousin Darryl's brand new baby had somehow turned into a seven-year-old girl, and I hadn't seen my cousin Garth since Grandma Pat came to town for her knee replacement three years ago.

I rarely bring a date along to family functions, because

more than two or three of us in one room can be hazardous, especially if you are shy, offend easily, clean and sober, or don't eat meat. The way my family demonstrates our love and affection for each other has occasionally been mistaken for verbal abuse by outsiders, so I usually don't take the risk.

But I knew she could hold her own; she is smart and strong and can take a joke. She loves fishing and hates hippies. There was common ground, and she might just fit right in. Besides, I figured, how could she love me and not like my Uncle Rob? He was the man who taught me everything I knew, and I look just like him.

The appetizers arrived in the middle of a raucous debate about flatulence and love: was unabashed farting in front of the fairer sex an expression of intimacy, or the sign of the death of romance? Was pulling the covers over her head actually a form of foreplay? Was our whole family actually lactose intolerant, or did we just not chew our food enough?

My sweetheart was unfazed, and retained her appetite. Maybe she really was the perfect girl for me.

By the time our entrees arrived, the talk had turned to embarrassing stories from when I was a kid, how I had panic attacks when forced into a dress for weddings, and how I finally gave in and wore a satin gown with dyed-to-match pumps to my high school graduation, just like the normal girls did.

"She looked so pretty," said Aunt Cathy solemnly, like she was giving my eulogy.

“I looked like a drag queen.”

Darryl shook his head. “I can’t imagine cousin Ivan in a dress.”

“I can’t imagine calling her Ivan.” Cathy stabbed a bit of broccoli with her fork. “She’ll never be Ivan to me. That’s just, like, your writing name, right? Nobody actually calls you Ivan in person, do they?”

Cathy asks me this, even though the entire table had been calling me Ivan all night. I stopped using my birth name over a decade ago, but Cathy likes to pretend she doesn’t know this because it makes her uncomfortable. I love her enough to allow her this tiny corner of cozy denial, and my continued silence on the matter helps to hold up my half of her little charade.

I have lots of people who call me Ivan. I only have the one Aunt Cathy. She has never understood why I changed my name, or why I vote NDP. I’ve never understood why she collects Santa Claus dolls, or how she can smoke menthols. It doesn’t mean we love each other any the less for it.

“I’ve always called Ivan Ivan,” states cousin Darryl, God bless him. No wonder everyone thinks he’s gay.

“Are we allowed to have dessert?” squeaks second cousin Rachael.

“Anybody want to try a prawn? Going, going, gone.” Rob speaks around a mouthful of his dinner.

“Don’t chew and talk at the same time, Robert. You’ll set a bad example. There are children present.” Cathy half-feigns disgust and backhands her husband in the upper arm, right where his shirtsleeve stopped and his tanline

started. This signaled the official change of subject.

“Set a bad example for little Rachael?” Rob smirks, rubbing his arm where she had whacked him one. “It’s already too late for Rachael, too late for all of them. I saw it on the Learning Channel. A child’s personality is fully formed by the time they turn three. We might as well relax and let it all hang loose. The kid is already who she’s gonna be, all we can do now is love her. It’s out of our hands. ”

Rob leans across the table to pinch one of my fries. “Did Garth tell you him and Allison are getting hitched in Fiji? Cath and I are going. You and your lovely lady friend should come too. I’ll rent us a boat and we can go fishing. The wedding is still over a year away, so start saving up. Maybe even Darryl will have a girlfriend by then, and we’ll all go. A family that fishes together stays together, isn’t that what they say? And you two girls would love Fiji. It’s the perfect place for you, really: it’s beautiful there, and the policemen wear skirts.”