

Honorable Mention
2011 RHA Story Writing Contest

The Wily Wager

by Mark Rafferty

“I love you guys’ new house,” I say to my brother and his wife. “But what’s up with the coyote warning signs I saw on the way in?”

Without looking up from the pots cooking on the stove, my sister-in-law shakes her head and says, “I wouldn’t get him started on that topic if I were you. You’ll never get him to shut up.”

I pull two beers from the six-pack I brought over, hand one to my brother, and say,

“What’s she talking about, Rob?”

He hands me a bottle opener and says, “Coyotes. Give me a break. There’s no such thing as coyotes.”

“Are you saying you don’t believe in coyotes?” I say. “Kinda like Santa Claus?”

I hand him back the bottle opener, and he pops open his beer and smiles, saying, “It’s all a conspiracy, bro.”

Flicking the cap at me, he adds, “I’m not sure who’s all in on it, but a week ago I went to my first homeowners association meeting since we moved here to Rossmoor last month and—”

“Take it outside, boys...” My sister-in-law turns down the heat on the burner and looks up at me, saying, “If I have to hear his thoughts on the matter one more time, I swear I’ll go into early labor.”

My brother winks at her, saying, “She just knows I’m right.” He pulls a cigar from the pocket of his Hawaiian shirt and says, “My boss gave me a Cuban today for completing a sale. Grab the rest of the six pack and we’ll smoke this outside before dinner.”

Doing as I’m told, I point to the street outside and say, “You were saying something about a conspiracy involving coyotes in Rossmoor?”

Before he can respond, his wife points outside and says, “Out!”

He blows her a kiss, then takes a swig of his beer and motions for me to follow him to the side door. As we walk out on the front porch, he snips the tip off the cigar and says, “Dude, I’m telling you—there’s no coyote problem in Rossmoor. They made it all up.”

I sit down on one of the two Adirondack chairs facing the street, saying, “So it’s not like Santa, but more like aliens?”

He pulls a book of matches from the ashtray on the table separating us, and says, “Well, I’m out here almost every night smoking a stogie...” Pausing to light the cigar, he takes a few short puffs and continues, “And I ain’t never seen no coyote.” Making silent the ‘e’ in ‘coyote’, he twists his lips and turns the ‘o’ into a smoke ring.

I put my finger through it, saying, “So what’s your theory about the signs, then?”

He hands me the cigar and says, “Fancy you should ask.”

Taking a sip from his beer, he says, “It makes sense that it’s coyotes, and not something like a bear or a mountain lion.”

“Or a chupacabra.” I say.

He smiles, saying, “Exactly! It has to be believable. And the fact that Rossmoor had coyote problems in the past makes people not question the nature of the beast.”

I pass him the cigar and say, “Nice metaphor.” I pop open my second beer and say, “But why would they make this up?”

Putting the cigar in the corner of his mouth, he makes a peace sign with his right hand and says, “Two words: *latent powers*.”

Scrunching my face, I take a sip of my beer and say, “Latent powers?”

A sheriff’s car rounds the corner with its sirens blaring, and he waits for it to pass before saying, “You know how I told you about how Los Al wants to annex Rossmoor?” Without allowing me to respond, he hands the cigar back to me and says, “Well, it doesn’t make the powers-that-be look good when coyotes are running rampant killing people’s cats and dogs in their own back yards. And since Rossmoor’s hands are tied without *latent powers*, the city of Los Alamitos is the easiest place to point the finger.”

I wait a few seconds to make sure he’s finished, saying, “What about the County? Why not blame them?”

He shakes his head and says, “The Sheriffs provide our police force. Like that one that just drove by. Sure, the Los Al Fire Department provides for us, but some people think we’d be better off if we could contract out all our services.”

I hand him the cigar and say, “Including the animal trappers. To round up all the wily coyotes.”

He rolls his eyes and stands up as if to go, but then sits down after taking his wallet out of his back pocket. He places a single bill on the table, slides it over to me, and says, "I'll bet you a hundred bucks that the next sighting is seen by only one or two people and without any photographs to back it up."

Looking at the hundred-dollar bill on the table, I hold my hand out in the air and say, "You've got yourself a bet."

As I shake my brother's hand, his wife waddles outside with her cell phone in hand. Before we can say anything, she says, "You'll never believe it but some teenager hit a coyote down the street with his car. They've already called the Sheriff and Fire Department to get the kid an ambulance. They might even get the News Enterprise and Sun to come take photos. They just can't figure out who to call to help the poor coyote..."

I grab the hundred off the table and shove it in my pocket, saying, "How about we go out for dinner instead? I'll pay if she drives. And let's make sure to drive by the crash scene for the Doubting Thomas here who doesn't believe in coyotes."