



# THE LIVING DESERT

## TOD GOLDBERG

1.

The coyotes are out. Three nights in a row they've come. You can hear them approaching. From a distance, they sound like a pack of screaming, laughing, crying children,

but the closer they get, the more you realize that, no, children don't sound like that. Children don't sound like they're screaming and laughing and crying while, at the same time, they're ripping living creatures apart into tiny little pieces. That's what the coyotes are doing. At night, they move from the open desert on the other side of the golf course I live on to prowl the manicured fairways, to feast on the rabbits and desert mice that cluster in the creosote bushes surrounding the course.

They're probably nothing to worry about. I remind myself that they are likely more scared of me than I am of them, or at least have reason to be. But every now and then, the local news here in Palm Springs will report on a senior citizen who (inexplicably) was out gardening at three in the morning and was bitten by a coyote, or my HOA will gently remind everyone, via a little bullet pointed note in the newsletter, to make sure our animals are inside at night. Then, a few days later, we'll overhear a conversation (at the pool, or the gym, or at the mailbox, or maybe my mother-in-law, who lives across the street, will relay the information) that someone's cat was eaten the week previous, and how something needs to be done about the coyotes and I always think the same thing: They were here first.

It's one of the many bargains I've made with the natural world.

Still, we've installed special fencing in our backyard to keep the coyotes out, so that I don't have to worry about my two cocker spaniels becoming a meal. The fence is wrought iron, six-feet high, and covered with a fine mesh from the ground up. I asked a conservation biologist who specializes in the

ecology of the desert, a colleague of mine at the university, if that would keep the coyotes at bay. He shrugged. “Not if they’re hungry.” And then he went on to tell me how coyotes can scale fences, can rip through mesh, *can...can...can...will...will...will...*

The problem with scientists is that they know the facts.

It’s a curious thing, I recognize: moving to the desert and then trying to lock the desert out; to enjoy just the view, not the life. In fact, when I was a kid, where I live now was the untamed desert. We’d go four-wheeling here, or, more accurately, just *wheeling*, drunk kids in Nissan Sentras crashing over sand dunes, rolling our cars, telling our parents they’d been stolen.

We’d sit out here in the sand and dirt drinking whatever we could shoplift from Ralph’s or steal from our parents: warm cans of Natural Light, peach Bartles & Jaymes wine coolers, bottles of Strawberry Hill, or if a particularly enterprising kid broke into his grandparents’ winter home, the occasional ornate glass decanter filled with something pungent. An endless ribbon of summer spread in front of us, the desert always some version of summer, telling lies to each other about the things we’d be or do, or the things we’d done, the sex we weren’t having, and off in the distance the coyotes would howl at us. Sometimes, they’d creep close and we’d throw rocks or our half-empty cans and bottles at them, or we’d just let them howl.

Then they built a golf course here, as they do in the desert, and replaced the real desert with an approximation of it,

followed a few years later with a giant master-planned community on a twenty-acre manmade lake.

There was an article in a *Palm Springs Life* magazine all about the development years before I bought my house here. The developer said it represented “what the future of the Coachella Valley can be.” I know this because I wrote the article. I interviewed the man. We were standing on a faux-Italian arch over the lake, me with a hand-held recorder, he wearing a golf shirt under a sport coat. Between us was irony, though I suspected then he wasn’t aware of it, and, hell, I’m the hypocrite who bought a house here. Because the fact is, it’s lovely. It’s where I wanted to live. It’s where I live, behind a gate, on a manmade lake, looking out on a golf course where Tiger Woods once played the Skins Game, where every day men and women in brightly colored shirts and visors stand a few yards from my house and drive balls into what used to be the low desert. You can still see that place. It’s behind a fence on the other side of the golf course. A fence that has been gnawed through.

My dogs are usually smart enough to stay inside when the coyotes come. Yet, I always run to their dog door to close it, anticipating that they’ll be hot behind me, ready to run outside and commune with their genetics. Instead, they usually move as far away from the dog door as possible. And when the coyotes come in the middle of the night, when I’m woken up by the screaming children, when I jump out of bed because I’m sure there’s a child in our house and that child is in trouble—some atavistic response, perhaps, since my wife and I have no children—the dogs just stare at me, unmoving.

But this night, the third evening in a row, is different. It's a few nights before Christmas and the coyotes linger outside. They move around the golf course, screaming, and our young dog Scout is agitated. When the coyotes head east towards the hole in the fence, Scout runs outside, howls, barks her warning bark, the crazed bark that doesn't mean the UPS man is here. That doesn't mean she wants dinner. That doesn't mean a leaf has fallen somewhere in the world. It's the bark that makes our old dog, Minnie, jump up as if her hips still work the way they did a decade ago, which makes Minnie throw her head back and release that mournful sob she has. It's the bark that makes me ask our dogs if there's someone in the yard with a knife, that makes me have conversations with our animals about the real things that scare me: Is there something I can't see out there, in the dark, waiting?

My wife Wendy steps outside into the yard and stares out into the night. There's half of a moon in the sky, but beyond our fence is only blackness.

"Do you see anything?" I ask.

"No," Wendy says. Scout sprints back and forth behind her, head thrown back, her tail unmoving, barking like mad.

"Maybe it's just the moon."

I nod. Maybe it's just the moon.

For the rest of the night and into the morning, the coyotes circle around, back and forth from the desert, screaming, laughing, crying and our dogs pace the house until I have to close them in our bedroom for the night just to get them to calm down. Around 2:00 a.m., as I'm about to doze off, I hear

the coyotes on the other side of our fence, so loud they could be in my house. I go to the window in our bedroom and look out, thinking I'll see glowing eyes, or that the coyotes will be scaling our wrought iron bars, dozens of them, breaking into my lifestyle-magazine yard. All I make out are the passing shadows of the pack.

## 2.

People die here. It always seems to be German tourists. They go out hiking in the desert with a single bottle of water and die of exposure. Though of course, other people die, too. Last year, a man who'd gained fame for his world travels, even making the Guinness Book of World Records for having visited all of the National Park sites in America, got lost at the Thousand Palms Oasis. There's a parking lot at the Thousand Palms Oasis. There's a road. Tourists. Screaming kids. Easily marked trails. From high bluffs, you can hear the rumble of Interstate 10, a paved artery that runs the southern width of the entire country. It's just a few minutes away. Everything is just a few minutes away: The polo field where they hold Coachella is twenty-five minutes away. The Betty Ford Center, where the celebrities go to detox, is twenty-three minutes. Palm Springs, where I grew up, twenty minutes. My house on the manmade lake and golf course, surrounded by a few hundred other houses filled with people living their normal lives, fifteen.

You take out the golf courses, the mansions, the kids screaming for their parents' favorite band, Lindsay Lohan coming down from her coke habit, the steak houses, Modernism Week, Fashion Week, White Weekend, Dinah Shore



Weekend, the bachelorette party of young women named Kimberly, the sunset that turns the sky pink, the hot air balloons that float in the sky, the majesty of the San Jacinto Mountains, the smell of jasmine that sits light on the air for months, you take away all of the natural beauty, all of the manufactured society, and what you have, if you're not careful, is a bad place.

It was 120 degrees the day the man went missing at the oasis. After I saw the story on the news that evening, I said what I tend to say in these situations, because it's almost always true: He's dead.

Part of it is semantic: what does "went missing" mean? The grammar behind the term has always alerted me to the attempted softening of the experience, the act of making a traumatic event—a man disappeared!—into a passive action. The other part of it is the simple truth of having lived in the desert for most of my life. Unprepared people don't "go missing" in the desert in the middle of summer. What happens is that they die.

### **3.**

Early the next morning, Wendy wakes me, tells me she's going to train. In the last year, Wendy has begun doing marathons, so she wakes up early and goes for miles. She wakes me before she leaves, wakes me when she returns if I'm not up. When I'm out of town, she texts me when she leaves the house, texts me when she returns. The reason is simple: I worry that she'll die out there, or be taken, or...or...or...

It's a free floating fear that I recognize isn't healthy and could possibly be mitigated by my training for marathons, too. It's silly, of course. Our gated community is surrounded by bucolic streets, bike (and golf cart) lanes, the deep green of the golf course, the deep green of the *other* golf course, just down the street, where you can golf at night under towering stadium lights. Even during the recession, model home flags fluttered in our area, tourists with sweaters tied over their shoulders, or license plates informing us that we had a friend in Manitoba, plucking up cheap resort real estate or foreclosures. Not the sort of place where bad things happen to good people.

Then I see a flattened snake in the middle of the road and I'm reminded that it's what you don't see that can scare you. Or you look behind yourself on a bike ride and you'll see, a hundred yards behind you, a coyote sitting placidly on a green belt. Or, more tangibly, there's this: a mile from my house, on a street I avoid, there's a notorious street gang, an off shoot of the Mexican Mafia, whose personal motto is "No Warning Shots." A few years ago, over a thousand police officers, FBI agents, and assault teams descended on the neighborhood where the gang lives. They used the Indian Wells Tennis Garden, where every year they hold the BNP Paribas Open, one the most grand tennis tournaments in the world, as the staging area for the operation. They arrested hundreds of people.

Yet, when I go to the Target which straddles our two neighborhoods, I still see them, gang tattoos rising up their necks and spread across their knuckles. They're buying toothpaste and Woolite, picking up some Advil, trying to corral their kids, standing in line at the pharmacy to ask the



guy behind the counter if there's one anti-itch medication better than the other, because even gangsters brush their teeth, wash their clothes, get headaches, have kids, get troublesome dry skin. I've spent most of my adult life writing about bad guys with redeeming qualities, have literally built the house I live in on the imagined lives of crooks and killers, and so I think I know how these young men think. (They are all young. You don't typically see old gangsters.) I engage in the magical thinking that they aren't that different than me, because, see, I understand their logic, because I spend days imagining how criminals think.

Which is insanity. You never know someone else's logic. You only know someone else's behavior. I know why the coyotes assemble behind my house: it's where the food is. And likewise, I know why the gangsters live where they live, from the social ills to the geographic truths: They're in a strategically advantageous trade route for the Mexican Mafia's drug running... Young men are attracted to guns and power and the sense that people both fear and respect them... They've been warehoused in low income housing, which then breeds an irrational pecking order over where they're from, what street they represent...

As if the land they live on is not merely borrowed from the desert. The places they claim are sand, just like the multi-million dollar homes a few minutes from them at Bighorn Country Club, or Sunnylands, where President Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping met for a summit last summer, or the hundreds, maybe thousands, of gated communities which dot the Coachella Valley, no one quite sure what the gates keep out anymore, since everyone lives behind one. Each and

all—with their own unique levels of perceived respect or disrespect—sand.

And it's really not true, to be honest, how I think about the coyotes or the gangsters, at least not directly. The truth is they scare me and I transfer that fear to something corporeal: the lives of my dogs, the life of my wife. What I'm really thinking is that if they see us, recognize us as locals, inhabiting this land, coming to Target on a Saturday night for peanut butter and mouthwash, just like them, if the choice to attack us comes along, they won't take it. So I make eye contact with them. I give them head nods. Will them to remember my face, to know I am not a threat to their way of life.

And yet, when Wendy calls me at 8:30 a.m. in the morning, an hour after she left me in bed to walk ten miles, only a few hours since I was woken time and again by the wailing of the coyotes, I am immediately worried. *They've got her.*

"There's something going on," she says. "The police are on the street behind the house."

"What? How many?"

"A bunch, uniforms and plainclothes," she says, breathless, maybe from running, maybe from whatever she's seeing.

"They've blocked the service entrance into the golf course with yellow crime tape. There's also a forensics van and they're setting up a tent. I asked the cameraman from Channel 3 News what was going on. He said they'd found a body but it wasn't suspicious."

How can a body not be suspicious? We go through the possibilities: A suicide. A jogger has a heart attack and dies on

the street. A homeless person, maybe the strung out woman who sometimes stands on the off-ramp to beg for change, goes to the golf course to sleep, or shoot up, wakes up dead.

And then Wendy says exactly what I'm thinking: "Should I say something about the dogs going crazy?" she asks. "Should I say something about the coyotes?"

## 4.

For six months, the people on the HOA board of the gated community I live in and the people who *wanted* to be on the HOA board waged a vicious war. I think it had to do with short-term rentals. Mello-Roos Taxes. Parking fines. Cable companies. Phone companies. The quality of roses planted around the clubhouse. The installation of a manned guard gate. On a near daily basis, letters would arrive in our mailbox with excessive use of all-caps, exclamation points, underlining, Comic-Sans font, poor grammar, threats of legal action, proclamations of slander, alerts that there were factions openly trying to ruin our very lives, the presence of real estate agents with nefarious desires.

They started rival websites.

They knocked on doors, asked if you lived here, and were you aware of the very serious things happening in your community?

They forwarded emails.

They responded to forwarded emails with forwarded emails.

They asked that you pray not to be deceived by your HOA.

They sent letters asking that we demand to be treated like PEOPLE, NOT CLONES!

They began doing robocalls that suggested we were all in great danger of losing all that we'd ever wanted. Then, there were robocalls refuting the robocalls. And robocalls informing us robocalls were not sanctioned. And robocalls letting us know that whoever had procured the list of phone numbers in order to do robocalls was being investigated.

Election signs went up. One touted a slate of seven candidates who stood for "Integrity. Experience. Results." Another touted two candidates who stood for "Stability. Responsibility. Integrity." One group had a meeting on a Saturday. There were cookies and soft drinks served and a petition to be signed. They were in favor of something and against something else and the petition was going to codify all of that and then the petition would be delivered to the city and life would improve for all of us.

The election signs began appearing on the streets outside of the community, too, staked into the ground outside the market on the corner, at the entrance to the golf course, in a patch of sand near the Indian casino up the street.

It was all very serious.

There was an election. Someone won. No one ever mentioned the result of the investigation into the robocalls. An email came from someone who lost that suggested we let the healing begin. That we're all neighbors. A new website went up. Community forums. News of a community golf tournament. News of a holiday party. News that there would

be a poker night. Take pride! Pick up after your dog! Don't park on the street! Come to the mixer at the clubhouse! Sign the petition! Integrity! Responsibility! Community!

There was no robocall, no email, no post in the community forum, no signs, no knocks on the door, no emergency update to the community newsletter, to let us know that one of our neighbors had been murdered and dumped on the golf course.

But if you don't take down your holiday lights, there will be a fine.

## **5.**

The body was not suspicious. A body is not suspicious. A body is a person. The events surrounding a body found on a golf course are suspicious simply by the nature of what it is: the real world walking into a fantasy. A golf course cut into the desert. Lakes built into sand. A sunny day in December, unseasonably warm. Cops drinking coffee, picking at a plate of food on the hood of their car parked at a diagonal in front of the service entrance to the golf course. Another plate, this one covered in tinfoil, as yet untouched on the same hood. People walking their dogs, pausing, looking, moving on. Golf carts streaming by.

She lived just on the other side of the manmade lake. I rode my bike by her house dozens of times. Years before, I walked through the model of her home when I wrote that story about the future of desert living. My wife and I had nearly purchased the same home, but opted instead for a view of the golf

course. What a lovely floor plan. What beautiful granite counters. What a spacious yard.

She'd grown up in the desert, graduated from high school a year after I did, went on to teach math at that same high school, just a few blocks from where I teach graduate school.

I studied her face in the newspaper. Surely I recognized her.

I studied the face of the man who they arrested for her murder, her live-in boyfriend, another resident. The newspaper said the murder weapons included a Glock, a box cutter, and a Toyota Prius. Surely I recognized him.

The pool, on a spring day. The gym, on the treadmill. In line at Target, trying to avoid the gangsters. At the clubhouse, murmuring about the coyotes. Stopped at the gate, waiting for the damned broken arm to work. The movie theater. The post office. The mall. You grow up in the desert, everyone goes to all the same places, your past is everyone's past. You remember when Sonny Bono was mayor. You remember walking on Palm Canyon during spring break. You remember when there was a riot in front of Fuddruckers. You remember that Dinah Shore Drive and Gerald Ford Drive and Frank Sinatra Drive cross Bob Hope Drive and that no one crosses Gene Autry. You remember when the modern homes that people pay millions for now were the shitty houses your friends' parents lived in after the divorce. You remember when there was one gay bar in town, Daddy Warbucks, and that high school kids used to go there on weekends to throw eggs at the men coming out. You remember the dead rotting smell of the Salton Sea. You remember when the mafia was still here. You remember that restaurant that used to burn down every year

or two. You vowed you'd get the fuck out of this town and never come back, what a terrible place to live, there's nothing to do, get me to San Diego or Los Angeles or San Francisco or Portland, man I'd love some rain, some gray skies. You know that other people, man, they don't even *know*.

But there was nothing. I couldn't place the woman, or her boyfriend. She had lived most of her life between thirty seconds and five minutes from my own life, had been murdered and dumped a few hundred yards from where I slept, and I'd never seen her. There are 300 homes behind my gate. Apart from my mother-in-law and her husband, I wouldn't recognize a single homeowner if I saw them on the street.

And yet, for the last month, I have spent countless hours thinking about this stranger, about her final moments, about how I woke up in the middle of the night and heard coyotes screaming and am now not sure if what I actually was hearing a woman being murdered.

## 6.

Ten years ago, I lived in a different gated community surrounding a different manmade lake. It's just a few miles from where I live now. It's down the street from the La Quinta Resort, which is where Frank Capra wrote *It's A Wonderful Life*. Every Christmas, they turn the resort into Bedford Falls. It's lovely. One of my neighbors in that community, a real estate agent named Paul, murdered a woman in the house behind ours. They were both real estate agents, actually. It was supposed to be a murder-suicide. Paul tried to shoot



himself in the head after he'd killed the woman—they'd been lovers, as I recall, and it had turned bad—but only succeeded in blowing a hole through his face.

Paul had been in my house, used to chat me up at the mailbox about how to get rid of the Norwegian roof rats that were plaguing the community, helped my mother find a house to rent, wore Hawaiian shirts, had a son who drove a Trans-Am, or maybe it was a Camaro, and kept his garbage cans out long past when they were supposed to be brought in (at least according to the HOA rules). He was one of those guys who was always doing something in his front yard, fiddling with a hose or a sprinkler, so you waved at him and he waved back. You thought maybe you knew something about him because he lived in a house just like yours. You could imagine him in all the rooms of his house, because you had the same rooms. And when the woman was murdered and Paul shot himself in the face, it was in your house, too.

I was home when it all happened. I didn't hear a thing. How didn't I hear two gunshots? And what would I have done if I had heard the gunshots? It doesn't matter, I suppose, since once you hear two gunshots, there's probably not much you can do.

No one ever said a word. Ladies Bunco at the clubhouse was not canceled. The Men's Pancake Breakfast was not rescheduled. I went to the next HOA meeting, just to see what people would say, because Paul was a popular guy, had sold many people the very houses they lived in. What I remember is that an old man stood up during the open forum and said we needed to do something about all the gardeners fishing in

the manmade lake, that “it” was a health hazard. What “it” might be was never made explicitly clear, though it didn’t seem like the fish were the health hazard. He was also concerned about the ease with which aliens might get into our development. Ones from space.

Later, this man’s wife, who seemed sweet enough, would ask us if we’d be so kind as to refill her bird feeder while she and her husband, who she called “Crazy Harold,” were out of town. We said sure. During that time, a pipe burst and flooded their house. From the outside, we could see a foot of standing water in their kitchen and family room. We coordinated a plumber for them, let workers into their house, filled their bird feeder from giant, industrial-sized bags of seed they kept stacked in their garage, and then, upon the couple’s return, they accused us of stealing a diamond ring from their house, told us that they were going to file a police report. A couple of days later, they found the ring right where they left it, inside their safe. The wife knocked on our door and handed us an envelope filled with five dollar gift certificates to the Elephant Bar.

## 7.

A few weeks after the woman was murdered, Wendy and I stand in our yard and look at the sunset. It is nearly 80 degrees. Winter here has lasted three weeks, just long enough to kill our ficus trees and roses. On the other side of our fence, I make out dozens of paw prints. The coyotes have been unusually active, to the point that I’ve taken to closing our dogs in our bedroom at night, until I’m certain they’re asleep. The result is that I’m not sleeping, staying up until two or three

or four in the morning, shortening the distance between when I fall asleep and Wendy wakes up, so that I'm sure nothing happens. There's this thing out there, in the dark, waiting, and it's called anxiety.

"I keep thinking about that night," I say. "About how the coyotes wouldn't leave and how the dogs were going crazy."

"Me too," Wendy says. She kneels down and pulls up something wild that is growing in our lawn, tosses it over the fence. Our dogs, Scout and Minnie, run around the yard, barking. A light breeze blows through and the air suddenly feels cool, so all four of us go inside. Moments later, Wendy shouts, and I'm sprinting to close the dog door. Outside, staring into our yard, is a single coyote. It is just over two feet tall. It looks lean and hungry, but calm, seemingly oblivious to the howling of our pets. I pound on the window, trying to scare it away. It watches me blandly for ten, maybe fifteen seconds, and then walks off. I run outside and hurl rocks in its direction, but already it is twenty yards away, making for the hole in the fence; a grand animal, really, a beautiful creature, that doesn't once bother to even look over its shoulder at the shrieking man.

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