

COYOTE BAIT

by Tom Lombardi

The coyotes took my wife. It was late at night. Frankly, if she hadn't been wearing that nightgown with the factory-stitched hole in front that serves no other purpose than to display her pubic hair, I'm pretty sure this whole situation could have been avoided.

The first time I first caught my wife rolling the recycling bin down the driveway I asked if she was by any chance in the mood to get tackled by some psycho with a boner? She said she was not. That I should shut up. That her mother had bought the nightgown for her. So *back* off!

I ask you, what kind of mother buys a slutty nightie for her daughter? This same woman, last Christmas, had purchased my wife a pair of green thong panties, equipped, I shit you not, with a red bow atop the triangle at the back.

Imagine the look on some man's face when he sees a bow on a thong; some douche from the New Business Department pouring himself coffee in the kitchen while my wife's all bent over to retrieve the sugar package she'd just dropped—I told her to stay off the sugar!—and the guy just so happens to spot, as her jeans slide down her lower back: a bow affixed to the top of her ass. You know what's going through this dude's head like one of those arrows with the explosive tips Rambo likes to use? A pretty ass with a bow on top! And I'll tell you what else is going through his mind: she's not only potentially slutty, but she's neat and tidy. Hence, the bow. Look, I didn't know some guy in New Business. I just knew that the coyotes had taken my wife. And I'd spent hours combing Griffith Park with a flashlight—one of the biggest natural parks in the world—and returning with enough fear and guilt to start my own religion.

So when I got back, I did what coke we had left in the house and did what any red-blooded American would do when his wife is missing: called my mother-in-law.

"Stop buying her rape gear," I told her.

"Ju are just jealous," she said.

For once, I had a retort big enough to fill a bazooka: "They took her," I said proudly.

"Who took hair?"

"*Her.*"

"I g-know what ju said. What ju think—I'm some ass hoil?"

This woman puts a "g" in front of Ws for reasons only God can decipher. Meanwhile, I'm pacing around the house like a murderer covered in blood.

"Who are ju talking about. Who took *hair*?"

"The coyotes took her last night. There must have been, like, ten of them—all yappin'—you know that sound, it's like they're laughing. Eye-eye-eye-eye... I'm telling you it's because of that goddamn nightie you bought her, it's... I told you it was rape gear and that someday we'd be paying the price and yeah, well. Now the coyotes got her and God knows what they're doing to her and look, I don't know what to do about this, you know what I'm saying? You have any ideas? Jesus. I mean, holy fuck. Coyotes!"

"Okay," she said, "fairst off, ju need to calm down, okay?"

"My hands are shaking!"

"Call da police."

"They told me to call animal control!"

"Ass hoils."

"Totally!"

"My daughtair is not some any mall."

"That's what I fucking said!"

"Ju need to calm down."

"Guess what else they asked," I said, hearing her sigh all hard, "they asked what she was wearing."

Her silence was like a gigantic, buzzing sign in the room that said: G-WHY ARE JU SO FUCKIN' JEALOUS?

"I'm not being jealous," I said, nipping it in the bud, "they asked what she was wearing. And when they find out I lied—I told them she was wearing big grandma bathrobe—they'll probably just

say we're responsible for any woman who's taking the garbage out in a silk nightie with a hole over her you-know-what!"

She said, "Dey have to ask that for da records."

"Look, why don't you just come over and we figure out a plan?"

"I'm in da driveway."

By the time her little red Ford Focus had been parked, I scoured the house for incriminating evidence, finding a baggie of coke on the floor under the bed. I was licking it like a "druggie" on an ABC After School Special when the doorbell rang. Of course, she has a key, so she'd already barreled inside and had begun dismantling the coffee maker by the time I made it into the kitchen, my teeth so numb from the coke I had to tongue them to ensure they were still there.

"I'll making coffee," she said. "Ju don't make it strong when ju make it."

"I'm a terrible human being."

"Okay," she said, her shoulders falling, "we don't half no time for jour passive-aggressive bull sheet, okay?"

Maybe it was the coke, but before I knew it I was hugging my mother-in-law so aggressively I felt sweat break through the fabric on her blouse. Hey, fucker, let me see how much of a man you are when the coyotes take your wife!

The moment we broke from the hug, she began scrubbing the counter with an impressive velocity. "No time for pain," she said suddenly with so much insecurity I just assumed it was a line of turd one of her husbands had fed to her in a hotel room years ago.

Meanwhile, I had to sit down, as it felt like Mike Tyson was inside my chest trying to uppercut his way out. If I was having a heart attack, I decided, I would continue to look for my wife. No time for pain.

"I searched for her already. For hours," I said, out of breath. "It's no use. We need bait."

She looked at me like I had snakes slithering out my nose.

"Ju expect me—"

"No! A younger woman that looks like Sonia. *Obviously.*"
"Oh," she said sadly, holding the Windex in her hand, "ju're right."

"The babysitter," I said, catching an ant scurrying up the yellow wall.

"Whose babysitter?" she asked.

"Ours."

"Ju half a baby?" She stopped scrubbing the fridge to stare at me, her fake eyelashes flapping as she blinked. "Since g-when?"

"Obviously, we don't have a baby. I mean, I think you of all people would know. But we have a babysitter. It's a long story—forget it."

"Guh-WHY in God's name do ju half a babysitter when ju no half a kid?"

"She comes over sometimes and we pay her—you know, to hang out when we go out. Look, every house around here's been robbed except for ours. I'm not going to let some drug addict waltz in here and take things we worked really hard for, all right?"

"Ju are so paranoid my God it's like *ju* are the drug addict. Okay."

"G-whatever," I said, suddenly wondering if my nostrils looked like I'd tried eating a jelly donut through my nose.

Christie arrived, as usual, doused in makeup and wearing one of those Juicy Couture knockoff tracksuits with the zipper all the way down on the top, barely concealing one of those white trash tanktops that practically grabbed you by the neck and said, *Do you want to lick my tits again?*

Her fingernails were texting manically now into her cellphone as she took a seat, avoiding contact with me; which, given the circumstances, I appreciated. She put the phone back in her purse, lit a cigarette, and said, "What do you need me for again—you were, like, so coked up on the phone I..." She glared at my mother-in-law and laughed. "I'm totally just teasing him, by the way."

My mother-in-law rolled her eyes.

"Coyote bait," I said.

"Okay, like," Christie said, "I don't know what that means." I explained.

She put out the cigarette, retrieved her phone again, and started texting again. "I'll do it. But I swear to fuckin' God one of those wolves lays a claw on my ass you'll have my husband to answer to."

"All right," I said, standing up and feeling for the first time in a while some hope pumping through my tired veins. "Let me get some nightgowns."

My mother-in-law was in the bathroom with Christie, helping her try on my wife's nightgowns. "Ju have such a great *butt*," my mother-in-law told her.

"You think?" Christie said, turning her head over her shoulders to check out her ass in the mirror. "I mean, you're not just saying that? My husband thinks I'm fat."

"No, he's *crasey*."

I was watching this from the doorway when I felt a stirring in my jeans. So I walked into the bedroom and tried to convince myself that it was the familiarity of the nightgown that aroused me, and not the memory of Christie's thighs clamping my head in an infidelitous vice a drunken night a few weeks ago. We hadn't fornicated. But we came close. And the guilt was pumping so fast now I practically lifted up the bed in search of a stray baggie.

As I got down on all fours and found nothing, I decided, for the first time in possibly a decade, to pray: "God. It's me... pause for your laughter. The coyotes, as you know, took Sonia. Now if this is some payback for me and Christie and all the shit I've done, come on, man, why not take me instead? Of course, I realise the guilt over something happening to her is punishment. But I love..." I began to tear up. "Fuck it," I said, getting up. Like that heroic dude on one of the 9/11 flights, I called out: "Let's roll!"

The colossal bed of lights in the basin were flickering in a way that made me sad. Light was always fucking with you in LA. Especially in the afternoon where it possessed a golden hue that could knock you over if you weren't careful. Its beauty reminded you of what you lacked. And when you revelled in its beauty you had to eventually return to what you had. Or didn't. Which never felt like much. Or maybe I didn't want it to feel like much. Anyway, when we reached outside, coyotes had begun stirring in the woods above us: "*Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye!*"

"Go!" I whispered to Christie.

She turned back with a perplexed face, and said, "If I die, please... tell them I was... *good*."

"Ju will not die!"

Christie grabbed the recycling bin, and in my wife's nightgown—a red, silky, slutty thing that revealed the kind of thighs AC/DC sang about—she wheeled the blue recycling bin to the end of the driveway.

Me and my mother-in-law hid in the bushes sharing a cigarette while we waited. Christie stood at the end of the driveway, lit a cigarette and looked up the road as if expecting the coyotes to show up in a cab.

Then we heard the barking. And we saw the coyotes swoop through and tackle Christie to the ground. "Help!" she said.

As per the plan, they dragged her up the hill.

The halfass moon hadn't shed much light. I'd been manically crawling my way toward the yelps, trying to cause as little sound as possible, when I heard the cock of a gun.

And strange breathing.

I turned around to see a coyote lying on its back and holding a gun on me; its eyes so vacant I could only think of Sonia's death. Its tongue was hanging out the side of its mouth and it held the gun like it were a bone.

"Please," I said, and I was about to explain how much I loved my wife, but instead I knocked the gun out of its paws. We glanced at the gun lying on the leaves now. It bolted. So I grabbed the gun and followed the fucker. But the darkness thickened.

And then I heard it: "*Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye!*"

I fired gun until the laughing ceased, the thing numbing my hand.

"*Sonia!*" I said.

Everything had gone eerily still.

"Honey?" she said.

"Stay there. I'll find you."

"That's all I *can* do."

"Right," I said, running into darkness, "then, like... just do that."

"I don't want to die, baby."

"No one does," I said stupidly. And then sure enough, there she was: tied like a chicken to the stick portion of a pool skimmer—probably something they'd stolen from a house down below. Her nightgown was ripped in the front, and on the sides, claw marks on her thighs and ankles, and even on her neck.

I untied her immediately. And kissed her cheek. And grew hard. And felt her feeble, wounded body against me. "Honey," she said, "don't turn..."

The little fucker leapt into the air and tackled me, its claws ripping at my chest as if trying to unearth my heart. "Cock," I said, "sucker," trying with all my might to beat him silly.

"Get the gun," I said to Sonia.

"Where is it!"

"On my waist!"

She grabbed the gun. But the coyote and me were caught in a wrestle. Its claws were ripping at my face. And I was so angry I had its head in my hands and I came down with it on a rock and smashed its skull until it crumbled like something made of clay; black liquid leaking onto the leaves.

I stood up and hugged her again. Speaking into her ear, I said, "Baby, I have to tell you something."

She remained silent, breathing slightly.

"I fooled around with the babysitter."

Her body went limp in my arms.

"We didn't fuck," I said, "just... you know, fooled around."

Sonia pulled back from the hug, eyes flickering for a few moments, and I was hoping that everything we'd been through would suddenly wipe free all our sins from the past when I heard a BANG and felt a bullet in my stomach.

My breath was beginning to abandon me

"Oh, my God!" Sonia shouted, throwing herself onto me, "I'm so sorry I shot you...are you all right?"

My mother-in-law arrived, chatting in Spanish with Sonia. Then we heard: "*Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye!*"

"I'm tired of dis bullshit," my mother-in-law said. She grabbed the gun and took off, and we heard some rustling and then—

"No," Christie was saying, "don't... please, don't—"

BANG!

"*Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye! Yiye!*"

BANG!

"*Yiye! Yiye!*"

The woods went silent.

"*Yiye!*"

BANG!

I crawled to my feet, reaching for Sonia's thighs like a lost five-year-old.

"Can we just go home?" I said. "Sonia, can we just go home? Rent a pizza or something?"

"You've been shot," she said, crying and laughing. "We have to get you to the hospital."

"I'm not going to die," I said, blood filling my hand.

"How do you know?"

"I don't. No, wait... I do."

I tried to wave hello to Christie and my mother-in-law, but my vision began to go blur. And I found myself falling back onto the dirt, noticing, through the trees, stars flickering in the great space above; filled only by Sonia and my mother-in-law's sudden, maniacal Spanish. When I went to raise an arm, I actually felt the bullet deep inside my guts. *So be it*, I heard a voice say. Which, suddenly, made a lot of fucking sense.

