

“El Coyote”

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Fiction

March 2023

Just after 6 PM, Hank finishes his last job, a rear quarter panel on a burgundy 2012 Buick Regal, whose owner – a silver-haired octogenarian named Mr. Minderman – backed into a USPS collection box outside of Jenny’s Kitchen on Pima Street.

“I had the strawberry cream French toast with bacon, which was always my Bonnie’s favorite, and maybe a bit too much joe, and it gave me some rumblings down low, which musta put me in a mood because I shifted into reverse instead of drive and next thing you know there was a crunch that woulda made your skin crawl,” Mr. Minderman explained to Hank, who listened patiently but could have gone without all of the specifics.

The vehicle, now, is good as new and Mr. Minderman said he’d be by Monday morning to pick it up. Hank and Juan clean up the shop, bolt the garage doors, and call it a day.

“Fine work today,” Hank tells Juan, a sinewy and heavily tattooed twenty-three-year-old who has been working here for the past four years. He has the look of a gangster, but Hank knows that he’s tame as a kitten. In fact, he’s one of those so-called Dreamers – a straight-edged one from a good family. He’s working on his degree in healthcare management at the University of Phoenix part-time, wants to run a detox clinic someday.

“I’m thinkin’ of tradin’ in the Ram,” Juan says as they amble to their vehicles. “Lookin’ at a Sierra 1500.”

“Nice truck. Miles?”

“Eighty-four thousand. Might be able to talk him down to twenty-two.”

“You’ve saved up that much?”

“You pay me good.” Juan winks.

“Keep doin’ the job and I’ll keep payin’,” Hank notes with a chuckle and a twirl of his keys. “See ya Monday.”

The traffic is spotty on 19 south. The sun burns like a blood orange in Hank’s periphery. He has the radio tuned to a pop station and one of the overplayed divas is singing about shining like a diamond. He doesn’t love the song, but he also doesn’t mind hearing it on the upgraded sound system in his Ford F-250. As he emerges from the sprawl into the desert, he rolls down his window halfway and sings along. The breeze, cool and dry, whips across his brow and around his shaved scalp, and he feels good.

His phone, which is mounted on the dashboard, beeps. A text message: *Dos Frijoles*.

Hank stops singing mid-note, rolls up his window and types a reply: *En el horno?*

Moments later: *Si*.

He exits the highway south of Green Valley and navigates east toward Madera Canyon on sun-bleached Mount Hopkins Road, which leads to his property. He owns ten isolated acres of dry earth out there. He purchased it back in 2010 and spent six years renovating and expanding the old ranch home that is situated near the center of the plot. The whole of it is surrounded by wire-and-post cattle fencing, although Hank owns no cattle. He has no livestock of any sort, just three good-natured old mongrels that he treats like children.

When he arrives at his unmarked gravel drive, he parks, gets out, unlocks the chain, and pull open the rusty steel gate. He pulls through, stops again, and completes the process in reverse. He drives another quarter mile before arriving at the house.

He climbs out of the truck with a grunt. The dogs, as always, are there to greet him, smiling and wagging and yipping.

“Hey, boys,” Hank coos. “How you been, fellas?” He gives each of them a rub on the head, a scratch behind the ears. They follow him into the house.

He fills the dog bowls with canned food and, as the animals gobble, pulls a ribeye and a bag of green beans out of the refrigerator. He pan fries the steak, rare, and steams the beans and butters two slices of sourdough. He cracks a bottle of Dos Equis, loads everything onto a tray, and carries it into the living room.

On Fox News, Tucker Carlson is reporting on the Congressional investigation into the January 6th protest at the capitol, but Hank is in no mood for politics. Over the years he has grown increasingly cynical about the whole system. He leans to the right on most issues, but he long ago decided not to commit to any one particular partisan platform. It’s a great way to make enemies, he thinks. He watches Fox News only because it is the lesser of the evils; the talking heads on the left-wing outlets are even more irritating. The relative neutrality of *PBS NewsHour* is what he really prefers, but they do not cover all of the issues that he likes to learn about. So tonight he snaps off the television and flips open the current issue of *National Geographic* and reads about lost slave ships as he eats.

Hank is fifty-three. Born in Guadalajara, he migrated to Tucson with his parents in the late seventies and has been in this area – aside from his four years of military service – ever since. They came on legal visas. His father was an experienced irrigation tech and was able to

link up with an agricultural consulting firm. His mother, later, found work as a hospice caregiver. Hank learned English quickly and performed relatively well in school, but college was never part of the equation. Upon graduation, he enlisted in the Army and completed Advanced Individual Training as a wheeled vehicle mechanic. After a short stint at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, he was shipped to Kuwait for Operation Desert Storm, where he worked on Humvees and M151s. He saw limited direct combat during the war, but was stationed in Baghdad for eighteen months after they took out Saddam and, there, the situation was much dicier.

He returned to Tucson in early 1993, relatively unscathed, and immediately went to work at a busy auto repair shop near the Reid Park Zoo. He transitioned into body work in his late twenties and soon opened his own shop, which employed six technicians. Three years ago, after a sixteen-year run in that location, he downsized and opened a two-bay facility in a nicer part of town. Juan is his only full-time employee, although he does bring in a specialist named Charlie for some of the pricier jobs.

Hank is not a wealthy man, but he is, more or less, comfortable. He has a bit tucked away and owns his property outright. The occasional side gig pads his account from time to time, but he's been debating whether he wants to take on that kind of work anymore. With Trump in office, the juice may no longer be worth the squeeze.

Hank has no dependents. He was married for five years in the early 2000s – a younger Oaxacan gal, a grade school teacher – but there was never any real passion on either side of that relationship. It seemed to fizzle almost as soon as it got going.

These days, he works, he reads, he attends church weekly and receives communion, and, whenever he gets the itch, he goes fishing down in Baja with some of the boys. He has family in Juarez, and pops across the border for the occasional birthday, funeral, or quinceañera. But that's

as wild as it gets. Simple, manageable, adequately satisfying. Hank toys with the idea of trying to find another woman, but he wouldn't know where to begin. He doesn't run in the right circles and, Lord knows, he wouldn't be caught dead on one of those swipe-left-swipe-right apps. Anyway, he does not consider himself especially lonely. The mangy, adorable mutts keep him company.

After dinner, he sits out on the porch, puffing a cigar, and spends an hour or so reading Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* by lamplight. The sparse, evocative language and continental lingo have grown on him. The book is a bit more digestible than Cormac McCarthy's work, although *Blood Meridian* is one of Hank's all-time favorites. He likes masculine stories, he realizes, especially those set down here in the American Southwest.

As darkness spills through the atmosphere like black ink, a chorus of coyotes begins to sing. He enjoys the timbre of it: sirenic and plaintive. It reminds him that the animals own this land just as much as he does, that all creatures are interconnected. It reminds him that human beings have not always been at the top of the food chain and may not deserve to be.

The dogs, lying at Hank's feet, lift their heads but do not vocalize.

In time, Hank closes the book and stubs out the cigar and gazes at the charcoal landscape and the distant rock hills which are silhouetted against the starry universe. Then he grunts to his feet.

He drives along a stony path that crosses his land toward the southeast. He keeps the headlights off. The route is familiar and the moonlight is substantial.

He arrives at a hunter green, corrugated steel shipping container, which is situated in the desert like some strange monolith. He parks, cuts the engine, and steps out into the darkness.

There is a double-barreled shotgun in the bed of the truck. He retrieves it, checks that the shells are chambered, and claps it shut.

The song of the coyotes provides an ethereal soundtrack.

Hank approaches the door of the shipping container and knocks with a specific, five-beat pattern. In a moment, the sound of footsteps from the inside and the clank of a locking bar being removed. The door creaks open to reveal a young man in cargo shorts, a tank top, and tattered sneakers.

Hank points the shotgun at the man. "Step out, please."

The man raises his hands. Behind him, the interior of the container is softly illuminated by an electric lamp, like a cookfire in a cave. There is a card table with two chairs, a twin-sized bed covered in a quilt, and several five-gallon jugs of water . A young woman sits on the edge of the bed. Her eyes are wide and white in the dimness.

"You too, dear," Hank says to the woman.

"She is pregnant," the man says.

"It's OK. I'm not going to hurt you. Just do as I say."

The man lowers his eyes and shuffles out into the desert. The girl, equally timid, follows him.

Hank assesses them up and down. The woman is in dirty jeans and a peach-colored top, the swell in her belly barely perceptible.

"Do you have weapons?"

"No," says the young man.

"Turn around and face the other way."

The man does and Hank approaches and quickly frisks him with one hand – the man’s waist, his hips, his inner thighs.

“OK. Now the lady, please.”

She turns around and Hank repeats the process. She gasps quietly when he touches her.

Satisfied, Hank steps back and lowers his shotgun.

“What are your names?”

“I am Diego and this is Mariana.”

“Where are you from?”

“El Salvador,” the man sputters.

“El Salvador. OK. Don’t be nervous. I just had to check you out. I’ve had problems in the past.”

“We won’t cause problems,” the woman interjects.

“Good. That’s good.”

Hank instructs the couple to retrieve their backpacks from inside. He rifles through them briefly. A change of clothes, prescription pills, photos, a few snacks. No contraband.

“When is the last time you had a meal?” he asks.

“Yesterday morning,” says Diego.

“All right, then.”

Hank drives them back to his house. Although he offers the front seat to Mariana, she opts to travel in back with Diego. Hank presumes they are married, but does not ask. They ride in silence. Hank occasionally glances in the rearview mirror. The couple huddle together on the passenger side and speak to each other in low tones.

The dogs greet them. Mariana refuses to get out of the truck until Diego certifies that the animals are not vicious. He pets them and they lick his hand and put their paws on his thigh.

Hank bakes two frozen pizzas and pours the young people large glasses of lemonade. He sets out a bowl of chips and salsa as well. They sit at the kitchen table and devour everything quietly, thanking Hank when he refills their beverages.

Diego and Mariana have strikingly similar features: thick hair, full lips, narrow eyes, sunbrowned skin. They could be siblings, but their behavior proves otherwise. Hank wonders what kind of trouble came after them in El Salvador but, again, decides not to inquire.

“Oakland, eh?” Hank says.

“Yes,” Mariana replies, her voice barely above a whisper. “I have a great-aunt there.”

“Long drive. Overnight.”

Diego and Mariana nod.

“You have an envelope for me?”

“Yes,” Diego says quickly. He reaches into his backpack and produces a stuffed letter envelope.

Hank takes it and lays out one hundred twenty-dollar bills, ten at a time. He is always amazed that migrants like these are not robbed blind before they reach the border. When he finishes counting, he says, “That’s fine.”

Hank offers them the opportunity to shower. Mariana looks to Diego, who nods. Hank shows her to the guest bathroom and sets a folded towel and wash rag on the closed toilet seat.

“You can use anything you find in here. Soap, shampoo, hairbrush. Feel free.”

She thanks him quietly and closes the door.

Hank and Diego go out on the porch and sit on wicker chairs. The dogs curl up nearby.

Diego lets out a sigh that, it seems, he has been holding for days.

Hank chuckles. “Feels good, huh?”

“Yes, it does.”

“Cigar?” Hank holds one out.

“Mariana does not like when I smoke.”

“Then best we shouldn’t.” Hank tucks the cigar back into his chest pocket. “How many days have you been traveling?”

“Since home? Today is the twenty-fourth?”

“Yes.”

“Over a month.”

“Did you find my property OK?”

“We thought we were lost once. It was a long walk from the border. Many hours – nine, ten.”

“That’s a rough stretch.”

“Yes.”

“But you crossed the finish line.”

“Well, the finish line is in Oakland.”

“Close enough,” says Hank. “We won’t have a problem getting there.”

“We were told that you are very good.”

Hank scoffs, “I’m just a driver, friend.”

“You ever run into trouble?”

“Not real trouble. Not yet.”

Diego takes a deep breath. Sand and dirt have streaked his face. Hank surmises that he is even younger than he looks at this moment. Maybe twenty, twenty-one.

In time, Mariana emerges. She is clean and manifestly refreshed, her damp hair even darker and thicker than before. She has changed her clothes and now wears a blue soccer jersey that is at least a size too large.

“You look much better,” Hank notes.

She smiles abashedly and says nothing. Diego stands, kisses her cheek, then heads inside to shower.

When she sits down, Pancho, the oldest of Hank’s dogs approaches and puts his face in her lap. She rubs his head gently and says, “You are sweet.”

“As sweet as they come,” Hank says.

“The dogs in El Salvador can be dangerous. Street dogs.”

“Not too many of those up here.”

Mariana hums and kisses the top of Pancho’s head. Then, as if remembering something, she looks out into the distance. In a moment, she covers her face and begins to cry.

Hank watches her quietly. He understands.

Diego and Mariana spend the night in the shipping container. Hank was inclined to offer them a bed in his house but, out of an abundance of caution, he decided to stick to protocol. He wakes at dawn, showers, feeds the dogs. He reads Hemingway for a few hours before driving over to rouse his guests.

He serves omelets and pancakes and it seems that Diego and Mariana have bottomless pits for stomachs.

“How do you feel?” he asks Mariana.

“I feel good.”

“No morning sickness?”

“A little bit. When I eat, it goes away.”

“I can make more.”

She blushes and grins. “Maybe a little.”

At noon they get on the road. Diego and Mariana sit in back with Pancho and Molly. Coco, the biggest of the dogs, takes the front seat and happily sticks his head out the window. According to Google Maps, I-8 would be twenty minutes faster than I-10, but the time savings are certainly not worth it. Border Patrol keeps a close eye on the former route, which follows the border through Yuma, past Mexicali, and up through San Diego. Moreover, there is a permanent traffic checkpoint near Pine Valley, California.

The youngsters sleep with their heads together and their arms intertwined for the first few hours. Hank pulls off near the California border so that the dogs can pee. He lights up a cigar while Diego and Mariana go inside the rest stop to use the bathrooms. The sun scorches in the cloudless sky, so he grabs his Diamondbacks ballcap from the glove compartment and covers his bald head while the dogs explore the field next to the facilities. He takes a seat at a picnic table and watches the highway traffic zip east and west.

Shortly, a Border Patrol vehicle pulls into the rest stop and parks two spots away from Hank’s truck. He clocks it and mutters *chinga* under his breath. Two armed men in green uniforms emerge: a burly and tall Black man and a sturdy but squat Latino. They walk toward the rest stop building, but pause as Pancho comes up to greet them.

“He looks like a maneater,” says the Latino agent jokingly.

“He’s *too* gentle, if you ask me,” Hank replies casually, his heart thumping.

The agent gives Pancho a pat and he and his partner continue to the facility. As they reach the entrance, Diego and Mariana emerge. The Black agent holds the door for them politely and Diego says, “Thank you,” in English.

Diego and Mariana stifle reactions and walk directly to Hank’s truck. He meets them there with the dogs and, wordlessly, they load up and drive off.

Once they have put some distance behind them, Diego leans forward and asks, “What would happen if they arrest us?”

“It would be worse for me than for you.”

“Would they send us home?”

Hank inhales and exhales. “It depends on various things.”

“Does Trump make it bad?” Mariana asks in her innocent voice.

A hesitation, then, “He doesn’t make it good.” Hank looks in the rearview mirror into her eyes, which seem to express both hope and sorrow simultaneously. She holds his gaze momentarily, perhaps to communicate something, then redirects her focus to the passing landscape.

They proceed through San Bernardino, north to Lancaster, without incident. After nine, they arrive at the Three Palms Lodge, a clean, pet-friendly motel on the outskirts of town. While the couple wait in the truck with the dogs, Hank books a room with two queen beds. “It’ll be crowded, but it is safest for us to stay together,” he tells Diego and Mariana.

Hank tosses and turns until after midnight, then decides to step outside for a cigar. He walks to the rear of the parking lot and paces back and forth while he smokes. Overhead, the moon is radiant alabaster and three-quarters full. The illuminated, palm-tree-shaped motel sign blinks green and yellow above the entrance. He decides that this will be his last turn as a coyote.

His first run was back in 2007. Three young Mexican men. It was a favor for a distant family member in Chiapas. Back then, he did not own the ranch, and so he took the much greater risk of rendezvousing with the migrants near the border fence. He was young and a good deal dumber back then and a bit of an adrenaline junkie. For a thousand-dollar fee, he moved them to Kansas City. That, like most of his runs, went off without a hitch.

In 2013, however, he almost got pinched. He was a bit greedy and agreed to transport a group of six Guatemalans, including two schoolchildren. The bigger the cargo, the greater the risk, Hank knew, but the payday made it seem worth it. They would not fit in his truck, so he rented a large passenger van. Outside of Los Angeles, he was pulled over for a faulty taillight by California Highway Patrol. Hank instructed his frightened passengers to remain very quiet and very calm. However, at the same time, he was sweating and on the verge of a panic attack. Trafficking undocumented migrants was and is a serious felony. As the officers approached the van, he was tempted to throw it into gear and see if he could lose them in rush hour traffic. However, he smiled, played it cool, and explained that he and his family were headed to Hermosa Beach for a wedding. They let him off with a warning, and that was that.

The money, of course, is not the only reason why Hank has provided this service. He knows that these folks are desperate to escape dire circumstances, and he has a soft spot for good people who want to work hard and build a new life. He rejects the misguided, right-wing notion that migrants, documented or not, are somehow making this country worse, injuring it. He ascribes to a rather libertarian, even radical position regarding immigration: this world, its land and its seas, belong to everyone; humanity was meant to migrate freely, flow liberally; borders are artificial and benefit those who have happened to win the birthright lottery. This, Hank knows, flies in the face of the various conservative ideas he embraces. However, he cannot

believe that God would want it this way – an arrangement that preserves the suffering of the many and the privilege of the few. He cannot imagine that Jesus would have sided with the nationalists.

But fifteen years of risk-taking is plenty. He's done his part. Diego and Mariana are his grand finale.

When Hank returns to the room, Mariana is awake. She sits upright in a chair in the corner of the room. Diego slumbers on their bed. Pancho is in Hank's bed and Molly and Coco are on the floor. All three mutts wag their tails upon seeing their owner.

He takes a seat on his bed, facing the girl. Pancho scoots over and presses his body against Hank's thigh. "Is the baby kicking?" he asks in a hushed tone.

"It's too early for that," she replies.

He chuckles, "I know. I know."

He removes his shoes and tucks them under his bed. Mariana watches him.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks.

"About my baby."

"Boy or girl?"

"I think it will be a girl."

"You've got that sense, huh?"

"She feels like a girl."

Hank nods. He suddenly feels very tired, but resists the urge to lay down.

"If she is born here, she will be an American citizen, right?" Mariana asks.

"That's how it works. Kinda strange, but true."

"If they send Diego and me back, can she stay?"

“I wouldn’t worry about that right now.”

“When should I worry about it?”

“I think you should focus on getting settled, on finding a community who will support you. Put your faith in God for now. When the baby comes, then you can worry, but only a little bit.”

“I always worry.”

“I can see that.”

Mariana shifts in her chair, tucking a foot under her thigh. “Will you be part of our community?”

Hank closes his eyes momentarily, then opens them. “I can’t, dear.”

“Why not?”

“That’s just not how it works.” He looks at her. Her eyes are big and pretty and soulful. She will be a wonderful mother, he thinks, although he knows it is absurd to make such a judgment based on a facial feature.

Wordlessly, Mariana gets into bed with Diego. Hank lies back and stares at the ceiling, which is bluish grey in the dark of the room. He feels lost for some reason. As though he does not know where to go from here. As though he has lost the plot. He’s been feeling this way with greater frequency in recent years.

“Good night, coyote,” Mariana whispers.

“Good night.”

In the morning they drive through McDonald’s and get egg sandwiches and coffee. Molly and Coco harass Mariana for a bite of her food. She giggles and says, “No puppies. Not for you. Not for you.”

They drive north on I-5 through the lush central valley. The farmland is patterned like a checkerboard on the east side of the highway, low hills to the west. They roll down the windows and let the breeze fill the truck. Smiles appear on Diego and Mariana's faces and stay there.

Diego asks Hank if he has advice on how best to assimilate into American culture. Hank laughs and runs a hand over his face. "Bitch about politics and eat as much as possible. You are both too skinny."

"But my belly is growing!" declares Mariana and she and Diego laugh heartily.

As they approach Oakland, Hank opens his backpack and pulls out a brand new cell phone. He hands it back to Diego. "Turn that on. Do you have a number to call?"

"Yes, we have a number."

"We'll be there in half an hour. It's best if your host meets us at a public location, a restaurant maybe."

Mariana calls her great-aunt and arranges the handoff. The meeting place is a Denny's parking lot on Hegenberger Road. Hank plugs the address into Google Maps.

She attempts to pass the cellphone back to Hank, but the older man waves it off. "That one's yours, he says. Paid in full for one month."

"Thank you. Very kind," says Diego.

"My pleasure."

At Denny's, Hank pulls in next to a blue Chrysler minivan. An elderly man in a cowboy hat and a woman holding a small bouquet of yellow flowers emerge. They wait and watch as Diego and Mariana gather their things and bid farewell to the dogs. When they get out of the truck, the man and woman step forward and embrace them warmly.

Hank rolls down his window. Mariana steps over and says, “I wish we could know you in the future.”

“Me too, dear. But it’s for the best that you forget about me.”

“I don’t forget anything,” she says.

Diego approaches and reaches through the window to shake Hank’s hand.

“Take care of your wife and that baby,” Hank says.

“I promise I will.”

Hank then retrieves an envelope from the glove compartment and offers it to Diego. It is filled with the cash that was to be his fee.

“You need this more than me,” he tells the young man.

“I cannot accept that. It is what we agreed.”

“Give it to your little girl on her quinceañera.”

Diego and Mariana look at each other. The young man takes the envelope reluctantly but with visible relief.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m more than sure.”

“We are in your debt,” says Mariana.

Hank chuckles. “Maybe, but I don’t plan on collecting.”

She smiles and unconsciously touches her belly.

Hank rolls up his window. Diego and Mariana and the elderly couple watch and wave as he backs out of the parking spot. Pancho sits up in the passenger seat and whines softly. Hank rubs the dog’s head, transfers a cigar from his pocket to his mouth, then drives away.