

John Fraim  
1702 Via San Martino  
Palm Desert, CA 92260  
760-844-2595  
[johnfraim@mac.com](mailto:johnfraim@mac.com)

4,043 Words

VILLA DEL SOL

By

John Fraim

'In all very numerous assemblies, of whatever characters composed, passion never fails to wrest the scepter from reason. Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob.'

James Madison  
Federalist No. 55

The Indian homeowner, a little guy they say is some type of doctor and goes to all the Pilates and Yoga classes scheduled at the clubhouse, is again at our monthly HOA board meeting positioned in his same strategic seat up in front of the auditorium. No doubt he will have his usual laundry list of complaints and requests for information from the board.

This is the third HOA meeting I've been to as a new condo owner at Villa del Sol (VS as everyone calls it) down here in Palm Desert. I bought a Cordova II unit at the beginning of January, the last of the seventy-five condos opened for sale about a year ago.

I sit in the back on the auditorium watching everyone file in before the meeting begins. Our meetings are held in the large auditorium of the clubhouse. On Wednesdays and Sundays there are movies in here and on Thursdays the Arthritis Club of Palm Desert meets here. And, every so often, there is some special presentation about some upcoming cruise.

My friend Melody MacGregor, the Social Director of Villa del Sol, is at the door on the other side of the auditorium welcoming homeowners into the meeting. A cheerful, sweet heart of a person, she has spent the first part of her career in the entertainment business and then a number of years as activities coordinator on a few cruise lines. She has a handle on everything happening at the place and I usually stop by her office when I'm up at the club and get caught up on the latest news.

At the front of the auditorium three present board members are seated at a table. Ethel Young - the representative from our management company Sun Properties - is seated at the end of the table with her usual angry expression, ready to preside over the meeting like some reluctant Queen. She is somewhere north of eighty years old and takes meeting notes by pounding old bony fingers on something that looks like an antique stenographer's machine. She looks out over the homeowners assembling in the auditorium with the displeasure of a

Marine Sergeant surveying fresh new recruits. We all seem to want too much in the way of services or information like where the money goes for the management company. The Indian guy and Ethel have gone at it before at the other meetings I've attended and it looks like the Indian is ready again to do battle.

Ethel has been with VS from the very start and - word has it - has seen it all. Sun Properties was there when Benedetto Amato ('Benny') the first developer of the place went bankrupt and absconded with a sizeable chunk of money from the original homeowners.

Yes, I imagine that you can criticize Benny all you want but you have to admit that he did have a pretty big vision for creating a slice of Italy out here in Palm Desert by creating a magnificent clubhouse and covering the barren sand of the desert with the kind of big cobblestone streets you might find in Italy. After he left, the property went into foreclosure and was then bought by another Italian developer who tried to make a go of it but after a while also backed out. And so-on-and-so-on over ten years up until our present owner.

You hear stories up at the Bistro in the clubhouse about those early days when a number of condos sat empty and the surrounding sand from around the development piled up against the condos and over the cobblestone streets. A lot of owners sold out for a big loss and left and those that stayed say that the place was like an 'Italian ghost town' if you can imagine such a thing. But then, anything can be imagined down here in the California desert.

Over the years VS has grown in spurts and stops with new developers coming and going. Things never hummed by with the smoothness of a well-oiled engine but rather more like the shaky coughing of an engine from some early automobile. In spite of all the setbacks over the years, the place has kept on moving ahead like that brave little train engine that could. It seemed like a brave little development that could.

\* \* \*

Our board is a pretty good group as far as I can ascertain. But, I'm a novice in HOAs and keep an open eye and mind on things. However in the few HOA meetings I've attended since I've been here I like Marcy Williams, the President of our HOA. She seems to be a reasonable but strong-willed woman I would suspect has some Scandi navi an heritage. She smiles and shakes her head at disgruntled homeowners in the few HOA meetings I've attended so far. She has heard it before. Her face is a friendly face but it is also hardened with the texture of a stale slice of coffee cake. Her leather brown skin is the skin of someone who's lived down here in the desert for a long time and I've heard that Marcy and her husband came down here to Palm Desert in the late 60s when the city was no more than twenty years old.

Next to Marcy up in front at the table is a young Italian man named Tony Howard one of the developers of the project during its rebound phase these past couple of years. His company took over after the big fiasco in 2009 when a lot of

people thought it was the final blow for VS. He is on the board because his mother is a current resident. I read in our local paper The Desert Sand that he continues to be involved with large developments around Coachella Valley and lives in a huge home in the old Movie Colony section of Palm Springs. Talk is that he is gay but then isn't everyone gay in Palm Springs these days?

And next to Tony Howard is Marge Silverberg, a slim tall woman with curly red hair who I see walking her small dog around the place all the time. There is talk she used to be a dancer on Broadway and that she was involved with some type of dancing business out here in the desert for a number of years.

\* \* \*

The auditorium is almost full in a few minutes and the doors are closed and Marcy steps up to the podium and welcomes everyone and asks new members to stand up and introduce themselves. There is Bob and Brenda, a couple from Canada who just bought one of the Cordova Units down in the 3400 Building and Howard and Bernice from Wisconsin who are happy to be out here with all the bad weather they're having back east.

Marcy smiles and says, 'It's good to see so many new faces.'

She then shuffles some papers at the podium and calls on Tony Howard to give his regular financial report.

Tony Howard comes to the podium and reads off the financials for Villa del Sol. There is five hundred thousand in the reserve fund. Two hundred and fifty

t thousand of this amount will be going to fix the tile roofs on the older units that the original developer did not build to code. Thirteen thousand will go to fix our electronic gate that seems to have a mind of its own. Ten thousand will be used to buy new commercial grade heaters for the clubhouse pool. A thousand will be used for new solar lights along some of the paths around the development after Betty Walters fell last week while walking her dog in the evening.

\* \* \*

Tony concludes his report and leaves the podium as the Indian guy up front wildly raises his hand to question some of the things Tony has said. Around the audience there are a few other hands that have also gone up.

Marcy comes back to the podium and tells everyone to hold their questions until after the meeting and says Marge Silverberg has something important to say to everyone.

Marge comes to the podium and takes the wireless microphone in her hand and apologizes in a squeaky voice to everyone that she has lost her voice to a cold she has been fighting now for a few days.

'I do want to address pet policy again,' Marge says. 'I thought we had an understanding last meeting but evidently this is not so. As you all know, there are plans in the works to create a pet park. We've met with our new owner Bob Truewood on this and he has agreed to provide space near the front gate for a

park and is having his designers draw up some initial plans. But until we get the park I have to remind everyone that there is a responsibility to clean up after your pet and see that he does not do his business on the lawns in front of the new condominiums. I've had numerous complaints about this since the last board meeting and I hope all pet owners can understand these concerns.'

As she finishes she walks over and hands the microphone to Ethel Young at the end of the table. The old woman takes the microphone like some unpleasant foreign object forcefully placed in her possession.

'We continue to work on getting cable for the development,' she says. 'But it is slow going. Until we reach an agreement I have to remind everyone again that installing satellite dishes on roofs and out in the common areas is against HOA regulations.'

This is one of the hottest topics at Villa del Sol nowadays and as she says this a number of hands again shoot up in the audience.

'We should have some word by next board meeting,' she says as she hands the microphone back to Marcy Williams.

\* \* \*

'We'll take your questions and comments now,' she says and passes the microphone to Marge Silverberg who carries it up the aisle of the auditorium handing it to various residents who want to say something. She passes the

Indian guy waving his hand to say something and moves to a guy in the back of the room

‘We’ve been hearing that we’re getting cable for as long as I can remember,’ he says and still nothing happens. How long are we supposed to wait for something they told us they already have when we bought into our place down here?’

‘I think Ethel answered your question,’ Marcy Williams says into another wireless microphone from her seat at the table up front.

‘No she hasn’t,’ the man in the back of the room says into the wireless microphone Marge has given him ‘I want some answers now and I think we all want some answers.’

There is a substantial eruption of applause in support of what the guy in the back of the room has said.

Marcy shakes her head and raises her hands.

‘Again,’ she says, ‘it is slow going as Ethel says and everyone has to know that we’re exploring all options and moving as fast on this as we can move.’

The microphone has feedback problems and Tony tries unsuccessfully to fix them by adjusting controls on the podium up front. The result is that the feedback combined with Marge’s faltering voice makes a sound like squeaky chalk running over a blackboard and everyone groans and puts their hands over their ears.

A guy with a middle-eastern accent raises a question about large dogs in the community.

'The HOA regulations state that 35 pounds is the limit for dogs in here,' he says. 'But there are a few dogs that weigh a lot more than 35 pounds here at Villa del Sol.'

His question leads to one of the homeowners immediately jumping up.

'Godamnit,' he says. 'So I'm supposed to get rid of my dog I've had for fifteen years! I'm gonna get rid of you instead!'

The large man angrily moves down his aisle and then up the aisle in the direction of the foreign guy who has brought up the dog weight limit issue. When he gets a few feet away from the foreign guy he shoves him so hard that the foreign guy falls to the floor and jumps on him as Marge tries to pull the big guy off. The whole episode is near a few others and me and I jump up to help Marge separate the two and usher the large dog owner back to his seat.

'This kind of behavior is totally uncalled for at Villa del Sol,' she says. 'Something that won't be tolerated. The fact is, some homeowners do have dogs beyond the 35 pound weight limit because they were never told about the weight limit when they bought homes here.'

'Thanks to our wonderful sales team,' a woman shouts in a facetious voice from the side of the auditorium

There is a ripple of applause in agreement with the woman.

'We're working on this also,' Marcy says. 'Bob Truewood has had a discussion with Jill and Jack in the sales office and they are very aware that they need to stress the dog limit to potential buyers.'

'Someone better also tell them not to tell buyers the place has walking trails either,' says a man near the front. 'I was told there were walking trails going in when I bought down here and nothing yet and that was two years ago.'

'They're coming,' Marcy Williams says. 'We ran into some problems with the city that are being worked out.'

'We've heard this before,' says someone else and again there is a flutter of applause in agreement with this.

Marcy Williams looks around at us homeowners in the auditorium. 'I hope you all can understand how much real progress we've made from where we used to be. We actually have a reserve in our HOA fund and the roofs are finally being fixed and we have a hundred and homes with seventy-five more being built. I only wish some of you new people were here a few years ago so you might understand how far we've come.'

An older woman up in the front sweeps her arm around over her head.

'Oh no,' she says in a gravelly voice. 'I wouldn't wish this on anybody!'

The auditorium erupts with a burst of laughter. I recognize the old woman as Anna Thompson who walks around the development each day with a tiny dog wearing these white go-go boots and what looks like an old bathrobe.

'Thanks Anna,' says Marcy Williams. 'Leave it to our longest resident at Villa del Sol to keep me honest.'

\* \* \*

Marge Silverberg continues walking up the aisle searching for other questions from homeowners. The hand of the Indian guy up front is flapping madly like a flag in a hurricane and Marge reluctantly walks up front and hands him the wireless microphone. The little Indian doctor takes it like some type of weapon and begins to shoot questions at the board.

Tony Howard stands his ground at the podium taking all incoming fire from the Indian who is talking in a fast, jagged English.

'I ask for financial report again,' he says. 'Like I ask last time and still no report.'

His question is directed at Ethel Young at the end of the table. Ethel eyes the Indian back with cold black eyes like the eyes of a desert snake about to strike out at some pesky rodent. A type of showdown plays out in front of all of us in the meeting. Ethel is not going to back down and she tells the Indian guy again - as she did last meeting - she will get the materials he asks for to him. The Indian guy keeps telling her law requires it all and he has not received them yet.

'You heard Ethel,' Marcy Williams tells the Indian doctor. 'You'll be getting the documents.'

The Indian guy is agitated but realizes this issue for now is a no win game and moves onto another complaint relating to ground cover at Villa del Sol.

Again, it is another complaint raised before at the previous meeting I attended.

He is passionate about getting ground cover over all the mounds of landscaped sand through the development so that the winds that come and go will not blow sand all over the place. Marcy Williams patiently stands at the podium listening to the Indian doctor go on and on about all the sand in the development. She has heard this argument before.

‘As I’ve told you,’ she says, ‘It’ll cost \$45,000 to even put in a minimal amount of shrubbery and I doubt many homeowners want to be accessed this huge bill for ground cover.’

‘But with all the wind we need to cover things over,’ the little Indian man says in bad English.

‘No we don’t,’ Marcy Williams says, firmly holding her ground with the Indian. ‘You have to realize we all live in the desert and the desert is sand and that many homeowners like sand.’

There is a roar of applause in the auditorium in support of Marcy Williams’ reminder that we have chosen to live out in the sand of the California desert. Few of the homeowners at Villa del Sol play golf or don’t care enough about it to support the thick lush grass like other developments out here and are in fact pleased with the natural look of Villa del Sol. One must admit that it fits into its natural desert surroundings in a way few places do down here.

Everyone I've talked to since becoming a homeowner at VS seems to enjoy the beige sand surrounding their patios and the way it goes up and down in sculpted hills throughout the development and is sprinkled here-and-there with small boulders and collections of desert plants inserted into the sand always meticulously raked. Ten years ago the original developer bought fifty acres on Country Club in Palm Desert right down from the big Marriott Desert Springs resort and started VS as a type of island in the fifty-acre sea of desert sand.

The Indian sits down shaking his head in the middle of the cheering support for what Marcy Williams has just said about sand in the development. It seems he has been silenced until the meeting next month.

\* \* \*

Marge Silverberg looks around the auditorium with the wireless microphone again in her hand.

'Any more comments before we close the meeting?' she squeaks into the microphone.

I raise my hand and Marge walks up the aisle and hands me the microphone and I stand up and introduce myself as the guy in one of the new Cordova II units in Building 2500 who just moved down here from LA after retiring from a career as a journalist for the LA Times.

‘I’ve had a few discussions with Melody,’ I tell everyone, ‘and have offered to publish a little newsletter for our community.’

I hold up a mock-up of a newsletter I’ve quickly put together on my Mac and wave it over my head.

‘Have a rough mock-up for anyone to see,’ I say. ‘Melody tells me that the development used to publish one but stopped a few years ago. She thought it might be a good idea to start a new one with all our new members. I wanted to get any feedback on the idea you might have.’

A silence has fallen over the room as I stand there holding the dummy newsletter. Then there is the distinct voice of Anna Thompson addressing my question.

‘The newsletter they published was by our management company,’ Anna says. ‘No more than a bunch of bullshit propaganda. It could have been published by our sales department.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ Ethel Young says from the board table at the front of the auditorium. ‘The VS Gazette was an excellent publication. There just wasn’t enough interest in a newsletter at Villa del Sol.’

‘There was interest,’ Anna says. ‘Just not interest in more propaganda.’

‘I was thinking of something published by just us homeowners,’ I interject into the discussion. ‘A lot of other HOAs around us have them. It’s time we have one also.’

I can see Ethel Young shaking her head in disagreement.

Marcy Williams steps up to the podium

'It is something we might think about,' she says. 'Let's shelve the newsletter idea until our meeting next month. I want to thank all of you for coming today and I am pleased we have had some vigorous discussions. We'll see everyone right here at five o'clock on the 20<sup>th</sup> next month. Don't forget that we have our movie North By Northwest starting in fifteen minutes and then after the movie tapas up at the Bistro.'

Melody MacGregor catches me out in the hallway under one of the big paintings of the countryside of Italy on the walls throughout the clubhouse.

'It's a good idea,' she says. 'I think we need a homeowner newsletter more than ever right now. But it's going to be a struggle to get one going. As you can see, our board and management company like to hold things pretty close to their chest.'

'Maybe it's not worth the effort,' I tell her.

Melody shakes her head in disagreement.

'No,' she says. 'The right type of newsletter for VP is worth the effort. Hang in there on the project.'

\* \* \*

It is dark outside when I leave the clubhouse. There are few homeowners outside as most of those at the meeting have decided to stay and watch the

movie. In the East I can see a full moon beginning to rise over the Chocolate Mountains down by the Salton Sea and to the West the light on top of the tram above Palm Springs looks like some evening star. The forecast for tomorrow is for another picture perfect day in the mid-60s.

I head back to my place over the cobblestone streets of Villa del Sol and think how much I have grown to love this place in spite of all the things not quite up to par. It's one hell of a lot better than fighting the crowds and insanity of LA just two hours to the west.

Then I hear the familiar high pitched barking of Anna Thompson's small dog and turn to see the little woman walking behind me. I slow down so that she can catch up with me.

'Seen the movie a hundred times,' she says. 'At my age you've seen everything a hundred times.'

We walk in silence for a few moments, her little dog barking angrily at me trying to take a few bites out of the bare leg below my shorts.

'The newsletter is a good idea,' Anna says. 'Just as long as it's published by us and not them'

'That's my idea,' I tell Anna.

'Well I have one hell of a story to start off with,' she says. 'A story you won't believe.'

'Try me,' I tell Anna, feeling that old investigative journalism spirit begin to stir again.

The old woman stops and reins in her little dog and glances around in all directions and then motions with her hand for me to come closer.

‘Tomorrow evening, seven o’clock,’ she says. ‘Be at my Casita. Number 101 on Via Roma.’

‘I’ll be there,’ I tell her.

‘Good,’ she says. ‘I’m asking Doctor Ramesh to also join us.’

‘The crazy Indian guy with all the conspiracy theories?’

‘He’s not as crazy as you think,’ she says. ‘And what he says is a lot more than just theory.’

Then she disappears down the cobblestone street in her white robe. Under the full moon the robe seems to possess some internal radiance that makes the little woman look like some desert apparition. I had an idea of what I had just gotten myself out of. It’s called LA. I just stand there for a few moments wondering what I’m getting myself into.

John Fraim

John Fraim is President of GreatHouse Marketing Strategy and GreatHouse Images in Palm Desert, California. He grew up in Los Angeles and has been coming to the desert since he was a few years old. His parents have lived in the desert since the late 60s and he has called Palm Desert a second home for most of his life. He has a B.A. in History from UCLA and a JD from Loyola Law School and is the author of Spirit Catcher: The Life & Art of John Coltrane, Battle of Symbols and Editor of Point Zero Bliss as well as many articles and essays. His most recent photo/essay on a popular desert trail appeared in the 3/31/13 issue of Desert Magazine. He is considered a leading authority on symbols and symbolism. He is presently working on an eclectic history of Palm Desert.