

The Coyotes of Chicago

by Taelor Skinner

The dogs in Moscow are living the life. If I had to be a dog living anywhere, it'd be Moscow. They have the best of both worlds. They aren't roughing it like wolves in bum-fuck, snowstorm Russia. They don't have to fend off bears or whatever predators are hanging out looking for wolf-sized snacks, or guys with rifles. There's lots of food in the form of our garbage cans and rats. People feed them too, of course. The Ruskies love them. Stray dogs are like their mascot. They have even got a big, bronze statue of one of the dogs in front of the metro.

A lunatic stabbed a dog to death. You're probably thinking she was some crazy hobo with no teeth, right? Well, she wasn't. She was a model walking her dog. Probably a designer Chihuahua; it was wearing a rhinestone jacket. Anyway, the stray starts barking at her and her dog, so she stabs it to death. The article didn't say how. I can't think of anything that a model might have on hand that she could also murder an animal with. Did she have a knife in her purse? An old school nail file/prison shank? A... I can't think of anything else, but women use some dangerous appliances in the pursuit of beauty, so who knows? They arrested her for "disorderly conduct" and put up a statue outside the metro station where the dog lived. He had a name too-- 'M'-something -- but it's Russian and all I can say is "Zdravstvuite. Menia zovut Peter." That means, "Hello. My name is Peter," which is lucky because Peter is a Russian name, and they said it right. When I studied abroad in Paris, I was "Pee-tair" for four months. Ruined the whole trip for me.

Not only that. France sucked. Americans overstate the myths, but there's truth to them. The girls are hot and easy, but some don't shave

except once a week. Do you know how much leg hair -- not to mention other body parts -- a woman can accumulate in seven short days? Trust me, you don't want to. I got rug-burn up the back of my legs and stubble abrasion down the front.

The people aren't rude exactly, but they're not friendly either. You can't strike up conversations from nothing. Strangers smile less. And don't bother try to speak French to them. As soon as they spot your saggy blue jeans and baseball cap, they assume you're another dumb American. If you really can speak French though, it impresses. I suspect that's how I did so well with the girls. This blonde, Sylvie, she gave "L'Arc de Triomphe" a brand new meaning...

Now that I think about it, Russia and France are a lot alike, two sides to the same coin. Hot, hairy women. Lots of black. Public drinking at all hours. The invasion of American consumerism à la the (I said 'the' twice) ubiquitous Mickey D's. And, going back to my original point, dogs. The French fucking love their dogs. Before I got there, I thought the pictures of poodles in *les cafés* were a joke, *une petite blague*. We have a picture of dogs playing poker; they have poodles in the restaurants. No joke. The dogs sit in the chairs and they'll feed them off of their own forks and keep eating with it. You hear people say that dogs' mouths are cleaner than ours. Bullshit. The French should make a statue like the Russians did; stick it in the middle of the Louvre (probably d'Orsay instead). No, French dogs aren't half as cool as the metro dogs of Moscow.

That's another thing. When it's winter, which it was the whole time I stayed, a few of them live down in the tunnels; maybe some stay year-round. And by "a few," what I mean is hundreds. When I was in Moscow, I counted, I

think, sixty-three. That's in the two months of Christmas break. How do I know there were sixty-three different dogs? They all look the same: mainly they're black, with some whitish and orange ones thrown in, but they're all about the same size, about like a husky, with sharp faces and pointed ears. I couldn't guarantee they were different dogs, but as I tourist, I went around the whole city. But here's the thing: those dogs, the smartest top five percent, actually ride the trains. And why not? Same as us, it beats walking. I don't know how they do it. Maybe they figure out how to navigate by smell. Somebody told me that they learn the names from the stations from the intercom. If a dog can learn "sit" and "roll over," I guess they could learn "Vykhino." It's a woman or a man's voice depending which direction you're headed—a woman if you're going away from the center or counter-clockwise on the Kol'tesvaya loop, a man going towards the middle or clockwise on the loop. Maybe they learn that way. They are more intelligent than the average dog. With wolves, it's the strongest wolf who leads the pack, but here the smartest one who's in charge. Imagine if we operated like that: the smartest guy (or woman. I thought Hilary Clinton was all right) won the election instead of the candidate who panders to the lowest denominator.

They'd get up on the seats and go to sleep. There was an old, gray dog on the Number Eleven who'd let you pet her if she was in a good mood. The locals called her Katya and this old lady would give her a bite of *babka* every morning. It probably wasn't healthy for a dog to eat that much sugar. Hell, a human'd get diabetes in two weeks on that diet, but Katya loved it.

Not that they're domesticated. In fact, they're slowly turning back into wolves. A lot of them hunt their own food: rats, birds, cats. They

don't rely on us, except insomuch as the vermin count on us for their meals. It's like the silver fox experiment in reverse. During the Cold War, this scientist took these wild foxes and bred them for docility. How this was supposed to further the spread of Communism, I don't know. Maybe they were trying to win over the world with cute pet foxes. I bet it'd work in Japan, if the Japanese didn't hate the Russians so much. It's one step down from a Pokémon. But that's what happened. The foxes turned tame. They started to bark and wag their tails like Fido's.

I learned more about dogs in Russia than I learned about piano. That's why I was there, purportedly. To study Rachmaninov. It was my mother's idea. She's got an inferiority complex. Backing up a bit, she was a secretary at Gramp's law office, so she always wants to prove how worthy she is of the family name. Part of her program is to ensure that I am as cultured as possible. What she doesn't realize is that culture went out the window a hundred-fifty years ago. If you're rich, you collect paintings -- you don't look at them, much less paint them. It's all about imitating pop culture, but much more expensively than anybody else, which is how we end up with paradoxes like Kobe beef truffle cheeseburgers and *haute couture* gym shorts. Unless you're ugly or a freak. Ugly, loaded, freakish kids go to art school where the poor, talented kids on full-ride scholarships make fun of them. Story of my life, but hey.

Technically I am enrolled at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago but I haven't been to class since last Tuesday. I've been tracking coyotes. You may logically point out that coyotes are generally nocturnal, and therefore I should be able to attend my classes, but you've got to pick

your battles. It's either the 9 A.M. Mixed Media seminar or 2 A.M. prowling with coyotes.

I didn't want to attend to college in the first place. I had intended to have a "gap year" and go Johannesburg or Dubai. My dad would not hear it. And who can blame him? He'd been ponying up for me to travel since I went to Rome as a gawky twelve year-old to learn how to cook. That was back when I wanted to be a chef, as if he didn't already pay three people to cook for us.

Most of my classmates assume that my family bought my acceptance. Despite what they think, I'm a decent artist. I even used a fake name on my applications just to make sure I wasn't benefitting unfairly from my family's reputation. My parents were really confused when they received an acceptance letter addressed to "Billy Peters." I had to explain it all to the registrar when I got here, but I never told my mom and dad.

Things will improve next semester when I switch to being a Photography major, but I have to wait until finals are over. My dad is going to be pissed. It was his idea for me to study architecture. Architecture can turn into a real career in case my grandparents disinherit me, which there's a good chance of if they find out I'm bi (you know, once in awhile) or Aunt Marion starts a fight with my mom again. I try my best to stay out of their shit, which is half the reason I moved all the way to Chicago, but sometimes I can't just sit there while she bashes my mom, and my dad won't say that she should shut her fat, collagen mouth. Mom's the only one who stands up for me; I owe her to knock Marion off her purebred high horse. Dad will claim photography's not a real career. He won't say it out loud, but it's not artsy enough for me to pretend like careers are below my notice. He

won't have the consolation of telling his friends and business associates that his son is an artist. They'd ask, "Oh, what does he paint?"

The other reason I came to Chicago is for the coyotes. They're a lot like the strays in Moscow. They're someplace in between tame and feral, caught in between freedom and dependence. Maybe they're better than the Moscow dogs. Those dogs are struggling to return to what they really are underneath. They've got to break open all the genes we've bred into dormancy, hone their teeth, reassert their ferocity.

Coyotes are themselves. They'll eat our food, true, but it's sort of pitying when they nibble from the bowl of cat chow on the deck, like how you hang up a kindergartner's macaroni drawing on the refrigerator. You don't need a crude picture of a car dropping noodles on the kitchen floor, but your kid needs you to need it so you do. Coyotes walk along the margins of our roads and sleep in our abandoned lots, but they do it because they can. The dogs do a damned fine job at city living, but they couldn't survive outside civilization with the wolves, not yet. Coyotes, it's the opposite. They're infiltrating us with wilderness. They are guiding us back to what we really are, that's what I think. Or maybe it's just me. They're showing me what I am, or want to be.

I've been trying to translate these qualities through the lens of my camera. I have to apply to the Department of Photography like any other student, competing against all the incoming freshman, and I must pull together a portfolio of twenty to thirty photos in the next two weeks to meet the deadline. I already have three or four good shots of a pair of coyotes near the harbor and one of a coyote eating a dead raccoon in

Humboldt Park. I'm lacking a centerpiece though, an image to hold the project together and state its purpose.

That's how I've ended up hunched in a dumpster on South Michigan as the sun is rising. If I can get the campus into the frame, I'm a shoo-in. But that'd be icing on the cake. What I'm after is the mother coyote and her pups. From what I've read in the library, they're about five weeks old. When their mother comes home to the "den," a dilapidated shed, I expect them to rush out and greet her.

At 6:12 A.M., a shadow slinks up the alley. Dew mats her grayish brown fur, emphasizing the profile of her angular skull. I can hear the faint scrape of her paws on the asphalt. She tilts her head towards my hiding place, sniffing, before uttering a series of soft yips. Four fluffy pups scramble from the wall of the shed and swarm around her legs. The night I saw them for the first time, there had been six. The mother licks the smallest of her remaining pups as the others clamber under her stomach, standing on their hind legs to reach her teats. She lowers her ears and tail in a moment of relative calm. I snap five photos before she walks away towards the den, pups trailing behind her. As she passes, she sniffs again at the dumpster, near where I had laid my hand while climbing up, and continues unperturbed. She knows I'm here, but she doesn't look at me. She doesn't have to.