

The Coyote Tabernacle Choir

by [Paul Illidge](#) (August 2021)



Dog on a Leash, Giacomo Balla, 1912

With reports of coyote attacks in the vicinity of the Mira River east of North Sydney, Cape Breton near the cottage home where I'm dog-sitting for a month while the owners Brenda and Jim travel to the other end of the province on a family matter, the death of Taylor Mitchell several months earlier has come back to haunt me.

The 19 year-old Toronto musician had been hiking in Cape Breton Highlands National Park on her day off day before

playing a concert in Sydney that night. Hiking the Skyline Wilderness Trail that runs ten kilometres through the Highlands from the Cabot Trail to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, it being a Tuesday there were few people besides Taylor on the trail.

Apparently around 3:00 pm an American couple overtook her. They were heading back to the trail head and they assumed Taylor was too. They said hello, had a brief conversation then carried on.

Shortly after the couple spotted three coyotes trotting toward them down the middle of the trail. Stepping back onto the grass because the animals were not about to shy away, the couple snapped pictures of the coyotes as they passed. They returned to the trail and resumed their hike, but only for a few minutes, until they heard the first screams. The rest is better left to the imagination. Except to say the coyotes were so aggressive it took several rounds of police buckshot to move them away from the girl's body. Even then the large males only backed off a little way. Taylor died of her injuries *en route* to the hospital . . .

It's a little over two weeks into my assignment and Brenda has already called three times, our conversation the same each time: *Just checking to see how things are going.*

After I tell her that everything is just fine, nothing new to report on *The Boys*, as she refers to her two dogs, she repeats during each call that just in case I *haven't* heard (the cable TV went off two days after she and Jim left) more coyote incidents have been reported in our area. Dogs and cats going missing. People out walking their dogs being approached by aggressive coyotes in broad daylight. Wildlife control is advising extra caution, warning that pets should be kept indoors after dark as that's when coyote packs do their hunting.

Brenda admits after each report that she's too paranoid for her own good; she's sure her anxieties are getting the better of her. But would I indulge her silly paranoia and tell her for her peace of mind that I'm keeping Whisky and Luther on their leashes when I take them out to do their nightly business?

I am indeed, I tell her, adding that Whisky (a light brown, short-coat hound who with his small head and pointed snout looks exactly like the dog on the *Simpsons*) and Luther (a large, longer-haired white with brown spots droopy-eyed *Disney* dog) never get a sniff of outside air, night or day, unless they're locked and leashed.

It's hard to say if she detects the false bravado in my assurances, but the truth is, all her *silly paranoia* is giving me *silly paranoia* too, and I'm not liking her for it.

I keep telling myself that her alarmism is all in her mind and in mine too as a result; that the various sounds I occasionally hear when I'm outside with the dogs at night (leaves rustling, twigs cracking, frogs chirping) are just natural noises at this time of year and nothing to worry about. Still, I keep the dogs close to the cottage within range of the security light. But all is pitch-black beyond if there's no moon. There's no one for miles around at this time of year. After the last call with Brenda I actually felt panic coming on and asked myself what I would do if The Boys and I were attacked.

I decide no more calls. They're freaking me out.

It doesn't help the situation that the group of retired fishermen I've come to know in the North Sydney *McDonald's* where I sometimes go for breakfast, confirm the coyote problem in this part of the island, albeit in a kidding way. They ask me when I come in: *Them dogs still alive, Paul?* and tease me when I leave with: *Watch out for them coy-oats*

now, their tone kidding or not, it's hard to say.

Nights continue to be quiet as can be when, ready to go, I open the back door a crack, poke my head outside and listen. All quiet, once I've made sure both leashes are looped tightly around my one wrist, with the other I open the door enough for the pent up dogs to squeeze through in front of me as with my free hand I grab the handle and pull the back door shut behind me.

Working fast, it takes a second or two before I get a good grip on the separate leashes with both dogs straining to get going and brace myself: thinking it's playtime, they bypass the stairs, leap off the porch and hit the ground running—until the eight-foot leashes run out and their collars wrench them to an acrobatic halt. But just briefly. A second later they shoot off in different directions until again they're caught by the eight-foot yank. With both my shoulders feeling like they've been ripped from their sockets, I swear at The Boys to cut the nonsense and have their pee. In a flurry of sniffing they search for the best place to go.

A moonless, starless night tonight, all is silence except for their sniffing. While I wait, I'm overcome by the uneasy feeling I've been having lately that we're being watched. A glance up the lane to the shoreline road, left and right into the woods, I can't see anything moving, there's not a sound, but I'm not convinced. My intuition tells me there are eyes on us.

As they have the last three nights, the dogs hear something and start barking, pausing after a few seconds to listen.

In the silence that follows—as happened for the first time last night—what sounds like a dog returns the bark. A moment later there's another, then another, then several more. Two or three, six or seven? It's impossible to tell how many

of them there might be—

Time to go, boys, I announce with a hard tug on their leashes. But heading inside is the last thing they want to do. I have to lean back with all my weight to avoid being dragged toward the road where the coyote cries are continuing. Whisky gives in, however Luther is bound and determined to stay outside and frolic—this while he and Whisky are barking madly in the direction of the yips, yaps and yelps coming from the woods, growing louder and more frequent. I finally wrangle The Boys up the porch stairs and, tangled in each other's leashes, shove them inside, free my hands and slam the door shut then sink to the floor, rubbing my raw chafed wrists, leaning back against the door exhausted, out of breath, my whole body aching as the tear around the kitchen barking hysterically.

When I finally make it to my feet, I find the treat box and give it a shake. The Boys quiet right down, scoot over and sit down in front of me. I pitch their treats toward the living room, step over to the back door, open up and slip out onto the porch for a look and listen.

Nothing for a couple of minutes . . . then a plaintive lone coyote cry goes up some distance away to the south. There's a pause, then the cry comes again, not as loud. The coast seems to be clear around the property. The dogs are leaping up at the back door barking; I ignore them, walk around to the front of the cottage and down to the river to clear my head. After a while I hear the phone ringing through an open window in the living-room. Brenda probably . . .

The following night I get The Boys ready to go out an hour earlier. Not taking any chances, I use the four-foot leashes that Brenda, in her message last night, apologized for not telling me she had left hanging in the front door coat-closet. *The Boys will hate them because they like the freedom of the larger ones, but they'll be much better behaved. It's whatever you prefer.*

All set in the short leashes, I wait to open the back door until they're both sitting down. They seem to get the picture, as Brenda said they would. I hold out a handful of treats, but on a tip about obedience from a well-known dog whisperer I've been reading about on the Internet, I return them to my pocket, making The Boys wait for another minute before I open up and, gripping the leashes tight, let them step outside. Luther waits while I close the door. Whisky needs several yanks on the short leash before he falls in line. We wait on the porch, taking in the silence for a moment before descending the stairs, where I give them their treats. Gobbed instantly, the two of them sit up eagerly, wagging their tongues, ready for more.

All remains quiet and still as The Boys scour for places to do their business. I let them sniff around the lawn as far as the base of the cedar hedge where a jackrabbit sometimes shows up to taunt them. But not tonight, thank goodness. Back we go inside, The Boys receiving extra treats for their well-behaved cooperation.

The next two nights it's the same. An earlier pee hour, healthy doses of Purina All-Beef Dog Snacks while we're leashing up, and The Boys, if not completely docile are at least less restive, somewhat more amenable. Four feet doesn't give us much leeway. Any way you look at it it's a pain for all three of us to be using the shorter leashes. All the dogs can do is stand at my side like appendages. If they want to move, I have to move with them. And wait while they sniff, looking away when they go, whisking them up the stairs—tripping over Whisky when she cuts in front of me trying to go in first, banging my head against the doorframe, Luther lunging for the stairs. Once inside I announce a return to the eight-foot leashes, warning the two of them it's on a probationary basis.

There are no more phone calls from Brenda. All is quiet on the coyote front. It seems her worst fears won't be

realized; that I'll be returning The Boys to her alive and well in just over a week.

On the third night, I celebrate the completion of an important chapter in the book I'm working on by opening a bottle of wine while I make a late dinner. It's the first alcohol I've had in my three weeks on the job, so I'm going easy on the burgundy while I barbecue a beef tenderloin steak and grill some vegetables. The Boys are occupied with new chew toys I've given them. A golden sunset to the west over the river completing the picture, I'm turning the tenderloin over when the landline rings inside. It can only be Brenda. I can't leave the barbecue. I'll call her back.

Apprehensive as I always am about Brenda's high-anxiety phone calls, I drink more wine while eating dinner than I should. I make coffee afterwards then pour a snifter of Jim's Rémy Martin cognac to calm my nerves.

Her greeting effusive with thanks for all I'm doing to help them out during this stressful time, Brenda gets right to the point. She and Jim will be away another week, if that's all right. The family affairs they're tending to are turning out to be more complicated than expected. They can't be hurried up. She hopes I don't mind.

I tell her I don't. It's out of her control. I understand how families are. Things will be fine in the Mira. I have the dogs in a good routine. I think they're enjoying themselves, which is music to her ears, she says. Adding, I'm not to worry. In anticipation of something like this happening there are about a dozen extra dinners she made for me in the downstairs freezer.

To my surprise she says not a word about coyotes; apologizes once more for any inconvenience this will cause, signing off with: *Give The Boys big hugs!*

Hanging up, I go straight to the sideboard and pour

myself a stiff cognac to mull over the change of plans, about which I'm not happy, but of course it can't be helped. As uninviting as the prospect is, I know I shouldn't be so selfish. Guilt kicks in. It's not the dogs that have got me wound up, it's the coyotes: the spectre of Taylor Mitchell lying mauled on the trail has me spooked.

My friend DB with whom I was staying up in East Margaree when Brenda called about dog-sitting, took me for a walk along the Skyline Wilderness Trail shortly after I arrived in January. We happened to pass the spot where Taylor was attacked, marked by a makeshift memorial. It was quite disturbing at the time. Even more so when DB told me it's against the law in Cape Breton to shoot coyotes. Even if they've killed a human being.

Two more cognacs while I make some notes for my next chapter and before I know it The Boys are pestering me to go out, on the hyper side because it's 10:45, an hour late on our new regime.

Leashes in my right hand, I open the door a crack, stick my head outside to make sure the coast is clear, keeping the door between my legs to block Whisky from squeezing through, Luther pressing right behind. In a moment of woozy inattention from overdoing the cognac, I'm slow reaching back for the door handle and miss it. Whisky darts past me, his leash sliding out of my hand as he shoots across the porch and leaps for the ground, Luther bolting down the stairs right behind him while in my drunken state, as I'm struggling to get a better grip on his leash it tightens around my wrist for a second then slips off before I can grab it.

The Boys tear across the lawn barking madly, leashes trailing out behind as they disappear into the darkness beyond the security light headed for the shore road where, in all the commotion, I haven't noticed the high-pitched, hungry howls of who knows how many coyotes coming from the woods, Whisky and

Luther barking up by the road now—

I straighten up, in shock, taking a second to think. Flashlight. I run to the kitchen and search the drawers, check Jim's work bench in the basement. He has one. And a pipe wrench, just in case.

The coyote chorus has moved further down the road by the time I get there. Reassured by the sound of Whisky's and Luther's barking amid the coyote cacophony, I call them and speed up, the flashlight beam trained on the curving road ahead. I think I'm coming closer when the barks and howls move further down the road. The yipping and yapping going up in the woods makes it seem like I'm surrounded. The cries are intense, sharp, fast, I hold the flashlight up in front of me, listening for The Boys, hear them barking, run faster, the cries riotous like an attack is about—

All goes silent except for the sound of my breathing as I run, sick with a feeling of terror at what I'm likely to find around the next curve.

There they are, the two of them sitting obediently in the middle of the road looking up at a large grey timber wolf. His yellow eyes catch the flashlight beam as I slow down, taking stock of the situation. It's Hector, the wolf Brenda said the people at the end of the road keep as a pet. She doubted I would ever see him, but he would know I was there. Now here he is, looking down at Whisky and Luther as if to say *I wouldn't go any farther down this road tonight Boys, not with the Coyote Tabernacle Choir belting it out the way they are.*

Oblivious to my presence behind them, I reach down and grab their leashes. When I stand up and train the light back on Hector to thank him, he's gone.

Brenda and Jim home three days early, I tell them this completes my seventh successful dog-sitting assignment, but

it's easily been the most exciting. The dogs happy and healthy (though to Brenda's perplexity they've both put on weight like somebody's been giving them too many treats . . .) we stand down by the river talking while waiting for my friend DB to pick me up.

"I meant to ask you," she says as we're talking about the jackrabbit that likes to tease The Boys and gets away with it, "did you ever happen to meet Hector from down the road?"

"Not officially, no." She gives me a puzzled frown.

"The Boys and I bumped into him on the road one night. He disappeared before I had a chance to say hello."

"That's Hector . . ."

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