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MIKE, THE COYOTE, AND THE FERAL CATS

Myles Mires was the one who saw it. To this day, we believe him. I mean, he's out every morning way earlier than most anyone else. In spring, summer, fall and winter, he's out before dark. Before even the homeless climb from under their cardboard lean-tos or from under the bridges, Myles Mires is on his way to work. He scavenges. He covers the parking lots near the bars, he covers the alleys, the campus. He finds many things but usually only keeps CDs, jewelry and money. One day he came into Chimes claiming he'd found a hundred dollar bill earlier that morning. We said, Yeah, right. Then he showed it to us, a tire print on it. The drinks were on Myles Mires, who had a socialistic attitude about finding such booty. He considered it was everyone's. We all agreed, even Wylie and his Teddy Roosevelt economics theories. Wylie also believed we must support the president we most closely resembled, hence TR for him.

This particular morning, though, the only physical objects Miles Myres had found were a mechanical pencil and a *Playboy Party Jokes* book from 1967. We howled at the jokes, how outdated and un-p.c. they were. My fave was one about a guy in a bar who was overheard saying to a woman, "You're the kind of woman I could fall madly in bed with."

But Myles Mires' real treasure for the rest of us that particular afternoon wasn't physical or monetary in nature. Before he shared the party jokes book, he gathered us around and said that he saw Mike the Tiger, a female coyote who'd set up residence on the Indian mounds, and some of the feral cats huddled together at a cor-

ner of Mike's habitat. He said the coyote looked faintly green, possibly from the light on the mounds that mysteriously showed up after Hurricane Rita and had remained there since, elongating and contracting, rotating as if on an invisible spit.

Myles Mires said, after what appeared to be whispering going on between all the animals, the green light dissipated from the coyote and appear to settle like road dust on Mike the Tiger and the cats. He said they all sat there for several moments, shuddering, and then Mike stood, shook his body as if wet, throwing green off like water. The feral cats tore off for the nearest hedgerow. The coyote beelined to the Indian mounds.

Myles Mires followed her, but when he got there, the coyote wasn't there. Myles Mires looked at the green light above the mounds. It appeared to be losing its brilliance. It appeared more static than it had been. It appeared to be dying. Myles Mires watched the green light fade as daylight brightened, feeling spooked, he said. He shook his head and trudged to his office. The green light burned vague as love.

The light did leave, but no one knew for sure until dusk, when there was nothing but streetlamp sepiaed darkness above the mounds, sending researchers on campus scrambling to the mounds with their various implements, devices and research assistants. The head of Paranormal Mythological Sciences showed up with an infrared transit and tripod and a Gypsy psychic medium. Someone from biology brought cotton swabs and medical culture containers. Civil engineers showed up with EDMs, chemical engineers brought nuclear-powered microscopes, and geologists assaulted the mounds with augers, test tubes and Geiger counters. Someone from the Chronological Narratives Program lugged over all four volumes of Joseph Campbell's *The Masks of God* and a compass. Other onlookers and armchair paranormalists set up lawn chairs around the periphery and watched, took notes on their laptops, snapped digital pictures and recorded digital videos. It must've been what Roswell,

New Mexico looked like, someone said, when that alien spacecraft went down in the 50s.

Later, at Chimes, when Myles Mires told us about the animal powwow and the fading green light, we all waited until after happy hour and then hurried to the mounds ourselves. There was no coyote, there were no lizards. We, along with all the researchers and other interested parties, watched the darkness as if the light might return. Students and maintenance workers had also gathered around, all asking about the missing light. No one had an answer. No one said anything. No one other than the researchers went very near the mounds. Wylie even admitted it was spooky, and he trusted Lockean empiricism like a Dead Head did a packed bowl.

We overheard some passers-by that Mike the Tiger was suddenly acting strange, so we wandered over to his habitat. It didn't make sense, but Mike the Tiger did seem different, staring at us like he knew something we didn't. So we all started telling what we knew about Mike, especially after the hurricane. For instance, Big Custus reminded us about that day when Myles Mires saw a nutria blunder in and out of Mike's habitat before the hurricane. Mike watched it but did nothing. The nutria got away. He has it too good, Myles Mires said. Mike got lazy.

We wondered if Mike suspected that something was wrong with himself. In days past, no doubt, he would've sprung on the oversized rodent, slapped its ratty webbed feet from under it, clamped his teeth around its neck and suffocated the animal. He'd have then carried it off into the shade and eaten everything except those ratty webbed feet. A nice little snack between his usual meals of vitamin-fortified and fiber-enhanced dry food and leg of cow his handlers brought to him every day.

This time, though, Myles Mires said, the nutria slipped through the bars on the north side of Mike's habitat, did a fly's circuit across

the west end, and slipped back out between the bars on the south side, Mike watching it much the same way that visitors gawked at him. After the nutria disappeared around Tiger Stadium, Mike realize he'd lost his instincts. Already almost twice as old as he likely would've been in the wild, Mike had grown complacent, Myles Mires surmised.

"Can't cage a wild animal like that," Big Custus said, "and expect him to keep his edge."

The only time people really bothered Mike was during game days. When the RVs started arriving on Thursday evenings, tent shelters popped up like mushrooms after a Gulf Coast storm. Plumes of charcoal smoke rising into the boiled sky, people would whisk up to the bars of Mike's habitat in their purple and yellow skins, towing little kids, faces sweaty and Kool Aid-stained and wide-eyed. They'd point at Mike, and we'd overhear fathers misinforming sons and daughters about his savage nature. Tigers ate babies. Tigers ate ponies. Worst of all, Tigers ate bunny rabbits. Some fathers would be so far off the mark as to claim Mike was from Japan, Africa, Australia. No, dumbass, we wanted to say. Not until people and ships, he wasn't.

Another lie about him was that he was colorblind. Maybe, but we figured he could distinguish bright from tacky. Mike may not have understood the humans' purple and yellow skins, but on game days, the place would be almost chromatic with them, no doubt hurting his eyes. I mean, on game days, you couldn't sling a dead nutria without hitting something tacky, as Wylie would say, with *LSU* scrawled across it.

Then, not long before kickoff, Mike would be led into his trailer and hauled inside the stadium, 95,000 people screaming at him. A version of him that smelled of human and something acrid and unnatural would jump at him to make him roar, which he did, not because of the masquerading tiger but because he loved the sound of that crowd, as if their roar could catch his, soak it in and then yell it out, all in unison, his roar and theirs, one giant roar rising from the

huge oval yawn that rose from the drained and engineered swamp along the Mississippi River. Mike must've liked that a lot.

After kickoff, Mike would be returned to his trailer, to gnaw on a cow leg bone, cooling fans in the walls lifting little tufts and ridges in his fur. After halftime, Mike was driven back to his habitat, maybe assuming it resembled where he would be if he were actually in the wild. He'd watch people watching him or passing by. He may have especially enjoyed girls, in pairs, jogging past, strange markings—"T-I-G-E-R-S" or "L-S-U"—across their bright tacky plump rumps. Mike watched them with his head cocked like a dog's when it detected high-pitched sounds only dogs can hear. Mike might've longed to run after those girls, not to eat them, but to run with them, the freedom just to lope a long distance, for no other reason than to be able to run, to stretch his legs in a fully-gaited tiger gallop. The joggers, though, would disappear over a rise or around the stadium, and Mike would sigh through his nostrils and lay his chin on his crossed front paws and doze.

By Sundays, when the game crowd had taken down its tailgates and left, a sad quietness took over campus, the sprawling live oaks dangling lion's manes of moss over the dark sandy ground. Dark men in solid blue skins poked at garbage with sticks and dropped it in large black skins that contained no animals. Occasional cars would crunch the oyster shell parking lot near his habitat but the people would remain inside the cars, dark ovals covering their eyes, a tiny orange glow flitting back and forth between them. Mike would shake the mosquitoes from his face, rise and yawn, his spine popping as he arched his back. He'd walk into his cave and lie down, the surrounding night-time jungle agitated with sirens and horns, with car alarms and rattling bass thumpers, with laughter and footsteps. The sky growled with occasional giant walloping dragonflies whose eyes became fiery red at night.

The resident feral cats ventured out from the hedges and shrubs at the onset of dusk, hunting geckos, mice and roaches, just beyond

Mike's cage. The feral cats lived the life that Mike may have felt he was missing out on. He never bothered the cats whenever they eased into his habitat, sniffing out any raw rank morsels of cow leg that Mike may have dropped and overlooked and the crows had not found. Mike left them alone, even though they'd warily watch him, seeming to sense that he was one of them but he was also very big. If he flicked his tail, they darted in as many directions as there were cats inside the bars. Mike should've been able to indulge in this power he had over them, but he appeared only to grow sad when they ran off, and maybe he ended up wishing he were one of them.

One night they didn't even show up. For a couple of hours after dark, Mike scanned his habitat, the tall grass, the pond, his rope-laced scratching board, and the rocks, where a movement caught his eye. A tiny gecko lunged at a moth. He watched the gecko, the moth's wings still fluttering outside its mouth, until the gecko took a couple of gulps and the moth was gone. The gecko licked its chops and sped around to the dark side of the rock. It seemed everything was hunting, everything except Mike.

Then the sky grayed behind a heavy horizontal saw blade of a cloud and the wind blew and the rain lashed everything. Limbs ripped from the live oaks, and a noise like an elephant stampede rattled his den. He lay inside and watched waves of foliage rise up and sweep away like flocks of birds on the wind. Trashed whirred by and rain poured from all directions. After a while, Mike tuned the storm out and slept.

When he awoke again, all was still. He rose and stretched and ventured out. The sun was brighter through the live oaks, whose foliage had been stripped to winter amounts. Few people wandered around. He heard no birds, but the sky was unusually busy with the large dragonflies. Mike watched one fly southward until it was gone and then noticed his keepers creeping toward him with their long shiny stick again. He knew what was coming. He expected the sting

that always followed the appearance of that stick. Thud. Sting. Dizzy. Blur. Dark.

After the hurricane, his keepers had to give Mike a checkup, to make sure he wasn't somehow injured. After Rita, they did so again, but not without some deliberation as to whether drugging him again so soon after the first time was a good idea—Mike, after all, may have been the world's oldest tiger—but they went ahead and did. When Mike awoke the second time, he felt woozy and sluggish. He had little appetite, would only lick his legs of cow, nose around the dry food. At night the cats and rats stole all they could. During the day, crows cleaned his bowl and pecked at the cow legs. Even buzzards circled overhead if a leg lay uneaten for more than a day.

Mike's handlers were puzzled by this. They worried and felt guilty. They feared they may have killed him. But he is old, one said. They couldn't help that. He'd never have lived this long in Indian jungles. They tried to convince themselves that this was a correct hypothesis, but Mike was getting thinner, slower, and more depressed, it seemed.

When the green light appeared over the mounds, though, even Mike perked up. He sauntered to the northwest corner of his cage, sat and watched the commotion as people were drawn to the light. Around him, throngs of lizards scuttled in that direction and died when they reached the apex of the mounds. He could see the glow, strangely the color of jungle, burnt into the darkness. He must've sensed everyone was skittish, like a heard of antelope when it caught the scent of Mike. He howled. He couldn't understand why, but he howled. His handlers returned and watched him and were concerned. None of us had ever heard a Tiger howl. It was awesome and like a dirge.

A couple of nights later, Mike was still howling, more handlers watching, scratching their heads. And then something else howled from near the mounds. A higher pitched howl. We all hurried over to the mounds and saw a coyote on one, matching its yips with Mike's gut-bucket howls booming from his habitat. Up there in that green light and among the dead lizards, the coyote appeared confidently safe. And then it shushed its howling and started eating on the lizards. Mike also silenced, and we all returned to his habitat and saw that he'd returned to his cave.

The coyote, it was soon hypothesized, was the same one that'd made *Channel 2 News* and *The Advocate* earlier in the summer. In the Garden District, people began discovering their cats and small dogs missing, an empty collar in an alley, a severed paw under banana trees. The first suspect was the "foot traffic," as they were called, passing through the Garden District from the north side of Government Street, which served as the northern boundary of the Garden District and as a buffer zone against the impoverished black neighborhood beyond it. Most people there didn't mind the nannies and maids and home-health providers who brought the bus into the Garden District from the north side of town. People even trusted the lawn guys with their pick-ups and steel-grated trailers full of mowers, chainsaws, weed whackers, and leaf blowers. That suspicious looking "foot traffic," pants halfway down their asses, baggy sports jerseys, coming and going from their neighborhoods to the basketball courts in City Park.

The "foot traffic" was finally exonerated of the missing pets crime when it was discovered that City Park itself was the unknowing host of the perpetrator, the coyote. At dusk on several evenings, motorists claimed they had seen it emerging from the bamboo and brambles that clotted the small creek bottom through the west side of the park. Animal Control underwent a trapping program to catch the coyote and relocate it, but she was too wry for their traps and their easily-

gotten fresh meat. She stuck with the small pets. By Labor Day, forty-three had been reported missing.

Animal Control decided it would have to exterminate the animal. They concocted a plan. For the Saturday after Labor Day, they would force all officers to work, some even on overtime, and enlisted several police volunteers, and scheduled a drive. They would sweep up through the creek bottom starting from Dalrymple Drive, spacing men with shotguns ten feet apart, and shoot the coyote when they got a chance.

Luckily for the coyote, Katrina altered those plans. When the storm was approaching, all city officials were put on hurricane alert and had to assist with evacuations and emergency shelters. After Katrina, Baton Rouge was so overrun with abandoned pets from all over south Louisiana, Animal Control was busy trying to catch and identify pets and track down their owners. The coyote continued pillaging on this new bounty until after Rita. The green light beckoned her somehow. Unlike everyone else, she did not fear the light and came to it and took to it as if expecting it all along.

But after her pow-wow with Mike and the cats, when she ran off and Myles Mires couldn't keep up, she blew past the mounds, cut down Chimes Street, made a left onto Ivanhoe, crossed State onto July and followed winding July between the lakes and into the secluded month-streets neighborhood. She headed for the golf course across Dalrymple, where she met a Volvo wagon. The driver, a woman who'd lost three cats over the summer, saw the coyote in the periphery of her vision and gunned the car. The collision was greater than she'd anticipated, the coyote thudding against the grill and front bumper. The woman claimed she heard the animal screech like a scared cat before rolling under the car, the rear left wheel bouncing over it, crushing its ribcage. When she cleared the coyote, the woman pulled over, got out and looked at the dead coyote, eyes glazed and tongue lolled out onto the

oven-warm pavement. "Kill another cat now," she said to the carcass and then returned to her car.

Every car driving from the Garden District to campus put a couple of tires over the dead coyote, until there was barely enough to scrape off the streets, other than the tail, when street maintenance showed up.

"Like getting an inspection sticker off a windshield," Big Custus said, interrupting Myles Mires.

He said the workers shoveled the flattened coyote into the back of their dump truck and tied the tail to the radio antenna, as if displaying a trophy from an animal *they'd* killed. No one felt sorry for the coyote, though, except for possibly Mike, who howled all alone now, his voice strangely close to a falsetto, his trainers were apprehensive to hear. They were, however, pleased to see him eating again, savoring his leg of cow as if he'd been craving it for a long time.

The next morning everyone was surprised to see a gang of the feral cats out in broad daylight. At first they appeared to be chasing a couple of female joggers, who'd screamed and sprinted away from the cats. But the cats persisted, catching up with the two girls. When the girls tired and slowed down, the cats slowed with them until they stopped, and the cats rolled around in the dirt, exposing their bellies. From their own cats, the girls understood these cats were in a playful mood, very unlike how they normally acted, panicked, when people neared. The cats rubbed up against their legs, nudging them slightly as if trying to coax them into running again. Those cats wanted to run with those girls, Myles Mires said, stroking his Spanish moss of a goatee. They actually wanted to just run with them.