

THE DOG GIRL

*When you were a kid, did you ever fantasize about being raised by wolves?
It's not an unusual dream. Just be careful what you wish for.*

LEFT TO THE DOGS

LHer name is Oxana Malaya. She was born in Novaya Blagoveschenka, Ukraine, in 1983. Her parents were alcoholics who had so many children that they couldn't (or just didn't) keep track of them all. So instead of raising Oxana themselves, they let her spend all of her time between the ages of three and eight—eating, sleeping, and playing—with dogs in a kennel behind the house. There she learned to bark instead of talk, run on all fours, and fight the rest of the dogs for scraps of raw meat.

When Oxana was discovered by neighbors in 1991, the eight-year-old was more dog than girl. She sniffed her food before eating it—without the aid of her hands or utensils, the same way she lapped up water. If she had an itch behind her ear, she would scratch it with her foot. She was also found to have heightened senses of smell, sight, and hearing. Classified as a “feral child”—one of only about 100 known children in the world to have been raised in the absence of people—Oxana had no social skills to speak of. So she was placed in the Baraboy Clinic for disabled children in southern Ukraine, which mainly treats mentally challenged kids. Yet even though she, too, was challenged, Oxana quickly learned to talk, socialize with others, and eat with a fork. Now, at 23 years old, Oxana is trying to lead as normal a life as possible. But will she ever recover from her canine past?

LEADER OF THE PACK

In 2006 a British child psychologist named Lyn Fry went to Odessa to study the dog girl. “I expected someone much less human,” Fry said, and then continued:

I'd heard stories that she could fly off the handle, that she was very uncooperative, that she was socially inept, but she did everything I asked of her. Her language is odd. She speaks flatly as though it's an order. There is no cadence or rhythm or music to her speech, no inflection or tone. But she has a sense of humor. She likes to be the

center of attention, to make people laugh. Showing off is quite a surprising skill when you consider her background. When she walks, you notice her strange stomping gait and swinging shoulders, the intermittent squint and misshapen teeth. Like a dog with a bone, her first instinct is to hide anything she is given. She is only 1.52 meters tall (5 feet) but when she fools about with her friends, pushing and shoving, there is a palpable air of menace and brute strength. The oddest thing is how little attention she pays to her own pet mongrel. She was much more orientated to people.

Further tests showed that Oxana has the mental capacity of a six-year-old; she can count but not add, and may never learn to read.

Although Oxana still lives at the Baraboy Clinic she is as much an employee as she is a patient, working on the farm where she shepherds cows. And being a strong and pretty young woman, Oxana had a boyfriend for a while, but her canine instincts proved to be too much for him. He broke it off after Oxana performed a very chilling dog demonstration at a party.

THE DOG GIRL SPEAKS

Dr. Fry took a personal interest in the case and set out to help Oxana, who told Fry through an interpreter: "My parents completely forgot about me. Mom had too many kids. We didn't have enough beds, so I crawled to the dog and started living with her. Now when I am upset, I go off by myself into the woods and I bark." Theorizing that Oxana might be able to move on with her life if she came to terms with her troubled past, Fry arranged a reunion with the girl's father, which was covered by BBC television.

When her father arrived at the farm, he just stood there and looked at his grown daughter without saying anything. Finally, Oxana said, "Hello."

"I have come," replied her father.

"I thank you that you have come," Oxana replied. "I wanted you to see me milk the cows."

The meeting turned out to be healing for both of them, another step on Oxana's long journey to fit in. Yet there is one trait that she will always display—a trait shared by human and canine alike: "I am longing for affection and kindness. I like and respect my parents very much, no matter what kind of people they were."