



CURSE *of the* **FULL MOON**

A Werewolf Anthology with Stories by

Peter S. Beagle

Ramsey Campbell

Jonathan Carroll

Nancy A. Collins

Charles de Lint

Neil Gaiman

Barb Hendee

Joe R. Lansdale

Tanith Lee

Ursula K. Le Guin

George R. R. Martin

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and many more

Edited by James Lowder

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Worlds of Their Own

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Ulysses Press

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*for Scott Davis,
an unwavering friend*

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Introduction

Becoming Wolf

WE'VE ALL WITNESSED THE transformation—human to beast, rational being to irrational monster. For many, the word *werewolf* conjures images of sad-eyed Lon Chaney Jr. sprouting yak fur and fangs in slow, black-and-white lap dissolves. Others see Oliver Reed and Paul Naschy growing hirsute and horrible in a series of abrupt cuts, or David Naughton warping into a mass of writhing prosthetics while the Sam Cooke version of “Blue Moon” croons ironically in the background. For the younger set it's Taylor Lautner, poster boy for Team Jacob, shifting in the blink of an eye from shirtless hunk to computer-generated lupine protector.

But we've experienced other, more immediate manifestations of the change, ones not illuminated by the bright white disc of the movie projector lens. The stranger on the interstate who flips out when the driver in the car ahead hits the brakes too hard. The discarded employee or disheartened lover who curls an outstretched hand into a fist or fills it with a gun. The friend or family member who loses all semblance of humanity after one drink too many, or, more frightening still, for no clear reason at all. Incidents like these make the werewolf an easily recognizable monster, less fantastic than you might expect at first glance. And that's before we turn our gazes inward, to consider the times our baser selves have overwhelmed our own better natures. . . .

The instantly and intimately recognizable dilemma of the werewolf is not its only appeal as a storytelling device. Brian J.

Frost's outstanding *The Essential Guide to Werewolf Literature* is the place to start any exploration of the popular textual history of the werewolf, followed closely by a pair of books edited by Charlotte F. Otten: *A Lycanthropy Reader* and *The Literary Werewolf*. What all three works reveal is that, from its earliest appearance in English literature, in Marie de France's twelfth century narrative poem "Bisclavret," the werewolf has been a multifarious figure. And the best stories usually eschew the simple dichotomy of beast as avatar of evil, human as agent of good.

The lycanthrope's loss of human form is temporary, so it cannot be dismissed as a mindless force of nature. No matter how monstrous the actions perpetrated by the shapeshifter, the reader knows that its humanity will reassert itself, if only as a taunting reminder of an eternally elusive normalcy. The "normal," though, can provide its own threat, through stultifying conformity and a rejection of the emotional. Against this danger, the werewolf can stand as humankind's ally, a champion of the natural, a symbol of freedom. The recent wave of best-selling paranormal romances emphasizes the sexual aspect of that liberation. That connection actually stretches back, at the very least, to the earliest medieval reports of witches and werewolves "consorting" with the Devil, with the expected shift in significance—liberation becomes the threat of anarchy, the werewolf once again claims the mantle of depraved, brutish menace.

The stories in this anthology were selected to represent a broad spectrum of approaches to the werewolf theme, from grim horror tales to highly allusive literary works, two-fisted pulp adventures to light urban fantasies. Many of the pieces are fairly recent, though I also chose one "lost" classic from the turn of the last century. The majority are reprints—some widely known masterpieces, others less familiar and awaiting your discovery. Darrell Schweitzer's doom-shrouded Arthurian tale is an original, while the novella from Nancy A. Collins is a substantial reworking of a tale previously published by a small

press. Not all the beasts that stalk through these works sport tails and claws, and not all those who wear the form of the wolf are to be feared. What the stories share is an interest in exploring the disquietingly familiar conflict, the clash between the rational and the emotional, the civilized and the wild. It's a conflict that plays out around us every day, and one that, sooner or later, we will have to fight within ourselves.

If the curse of the full moon can lay claim to “even a man who is pure in heart and says his prayers by night,” to borrow the famous lines from the 1941 version of *The Wolf Man*, what hope do most of us really have to escape its touch?

— James Lowder
New Berlin, Wisconsin, 2010



MY ZOONDEL

Jonathan Carroll

Jonathan Carroll is the author of fourteen acclaimed novels, including *The Ghost in Love*, *The Land of Laughs*, *The Marriage of Sticks*, and *Bones of the Moon*. His novel *The Wooden Sea* was named a *New York Times* Notable Book of 2001, and others of his works have received the British Fantasy Award, the World Fantasy Award, and the Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire. Carroll's fiction defies easy categorization. His novels and tales tend to share some common elements, such as artists as protagonists, meditations on life through the themes of death and illness, and an interplay of the fantastic and the real. And while they frequently include the trappings of fantasy and horror, they do not fit comfortably within the traditional confines of those genres.

"My Zoondel" features another of Carroll's favorite subjects: dogs. He has described dogs as "minor angels" for the love and loyalty they offer, and here, as in many of his works, they prowl the shadowy, shifting turf between the mundane and the magical.

MY FRIEND SARAH . When everyone else was still par other's beds, she was already buying stock in genetic engineering and the Daimler-Benz companies.

"Sex is finished, Frank. Fear and prestige are next. Sooner or later one of those gene-splitters will find the cure for AIDS and herpes, so we buy into that now. But as long as going to bed is still dangerous, driving a Mercedes will be next best. You watch." I followed her advice and have never regretted it.

She was right about that, as with so many other things. When she said she had a line on a warehouse full of ugly fifties Naugahyde furniture, I shut my eyes and handed her a check. A few months later, we sold it all for a bundle to a new discothèque in town, Edsel.

We had a fling a few years ago but found out fast that we got along better over the phone or a good dinner than nose to nose in the dark of night. Smart enough to stop while we still liked each other, we've been close ever since. There's an unspoken agreement that we can call or visit any time to complain or crow or cry and the other will be there to give what they can.

A few months ago, Sarah called and told me she was going to buy a dog. I was surprised, because she'd never mentioned liking animals, besides having the kind of apartment that was always so clean you could have done brain surgery on the living room carpet.

"How come?"

"I read a book about stress. It says if you don't want a heart attack, you should get interested in the three P's: people, pets, and plants."

"Why not just buy a cactus? You don't even have to water them."

"I'd feel stupid talking to a plant. No, I saw a picture of this dog in a magazine the other day and fell immediately in love. They're the greatest-looking thing you ever saw."

"What kind of dog?"

"A Zoondel."

"A what?"

"They're a rare breed from Austria. They look exactly like the caboose on a train."

"How much do they cost?"

"A thousand dollars."

"What?"

"Will you come and help me pick it out?"

"I'll come and talk you out of it."

We met and took a train out to the tip of Long Island. At Montauk station, a round bald man named Otto Kak picked us up and drove us to his house. He talked about Zoondels the whole trip. How smart they were, how they house-trained themselves, never barked . . . I shook my head and looked out of the window the whole time. I had no patience with animals, even other people's. They always seemed to be shedding, or under your feet, or sick. I could understand why old people liked them. Maybe one day when I was eighty and lonely I'd go to the pound and take one home so I could have company and something to boss around. But until then, I'd see their shit under my shoe or hear them out on the street barking me awake at three in the morning and I'd be glad they lived somewhere else.

Kak's house looked like something from a model electric train-set: small, perfectly kept, sunny. As soon as we pulled into the driveway, the front door opened and his wife came out. She was followed by three dogs that ran over to the car.

They didn't look like cabooses, but were peculiarly square and *tight* all around. Tight was the word for them. Imagine an old-time mailbox covered with short reddish fur and you get an idea of a Zoondel. About as large as a beagle, they had floppy ears and soft dark eyes that looked friendly and intelligent. Nice dogs, but a thousand dollars?

We got out and bent down to pet them. Kneeling next to

Sarah, I was able to say without being overheard, “They’re cute, but why are they so expensive?”

“Because there are only like a thousand of them in the world.”

“Is it an investment?”

She looked at me and rolled her eyes. “No, Frank. I *like* them. Is that allowed?”

Stung, I kept quiet and petted the dog closest. It licked my hand. Its tongue was lemon yellow.

“Hey, look at that!”

Mr. Kak spoke. “That tongue is what got them into trouble! That’s why there are so few of them now.”

“How’s that?”

“The Zoondel was originally bred in Austria by a Graf Leopold von Bimplitz to hunt werewolves.”

“Werewolves?” It was time for me to roll *my* eyes.

“Yes. The story is that von Bimplitz was both a wealthy landowner and a serious student of alchemy. He must have been quite a guy because rumor has it that Goethe based his play *Faustus* on him. Anyway, he must have gotten himself in deep with something, dark powers or whatever, because he spent a big part of his fortune breeding a dog that could detect werewolves before they struck. That’s a fact—it’s in his biography.”

“Maybe he was just a nut.”

Sarah gave me a dirty look—she wanted to hear the story if she was going to buy one of the dogs.

“Maybe, but he did end up with a hell of a special dog, as you can see.”

“What happens when the dog sees a werewolf?”

Kak smiled. “The eyes turn the same color as the tongue, once there’s any kind of bodily contact between the dog and the werewolf. But that happens only after it turns six months. Before that, it’s only a doggie-dog.”

“What happens after it detects the, uh, enemy?”

“Nothing. It only tells you it’s there. The rest is up to you.”

“Have you ever had any experience with that, Mr. Kak?”

“No, I can’t say as I have. Maybe there just aren’t many werewolves in Montauk, eh?” He smiled a moment, then stopped. “But I’ll tell you something interesting, and this story *is* true. At the end of World War Two, Hitler sent an elite group of soldiers out in a last-ditch effort to stop the Allies. Called them the ‘Werewolves’; they were reputed to be the most vicious fighters anyone ever saw. Sort of like the Lurps in Vietnam, you know? Anyway, these guys did a lot of work in Austria, and one of the first things they did was go to what was left of von Bimplitz’s estate and kill every Zoondel they could find. That’s documented. That’s why there are so few now. Luckily, a number of them had been brought over here before the war, so the breed survived, but not by much. The question is, why would those guys go to the trouble of killing a bunch of dogs if the story wasn’t at least a little bit true?”

.

Naturally Sarah bought one. She was so delighted with the “Werewolfbusters” aspect that I think she would have spent two thousand dollars if it had been necessary.

I must say that “Mailbox” (she liked my image and gave him that name) turned out to be as nice a dog as you were going to find. He slept late, almost never peed in the house (even though he was only a few months old), and liked to be with you but not on you. After some time, I sheepishly told her I liked him too.

“That’s good, Frank, because I think you’re going to have to do me a big favor. It looks like I’m going to have to go to Hong Kong soon for two months. That building for the Wakoski Institute is going to go up after all, and they want me to be in on the planning. Which means I either put Mailbox in a kennel, or give him to you.”

“Give him to me. I think I can stand him for a couple of weeks.”

“That’s the point, Frank. It won’t be a couple of weeks. It’s more like a couple of months.”

“That’s okay. I owe you a lot of favors anyway. I like him,

it'll be fine."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely."

.

So Sarah went off to her building in Hong Kong and her Zoondel came to live with me a while. It took some getting used to, but within a week I liked knowing he was around. When I came in from work at night, he was always at the door to greet me with a lot of jumping and running around the room. When I took him out for a walk, he stayed close by and never pulled on the line like I'd seen so many other dogs do. An added benefit of walking a rare dog was meeting good-looking women on the street who also happened to be dog lovers.

All in all, having Mailbox as a houseguest worked out fine except for one strange occurrence. One very nice summer day, weeks later, I took him to Central Park for a long walk. As we were standing next to the Dakota, about to cross 72nd Street, I heard a loud crash nearby. Jumping back, I saw that a large piece of slate had fallen nearby and come very close to hitting us. Without thinking, I looked up and saw someone hanging half out of a high window in the building, shouting down at . . . us? It certainly appeared that way. New York is packed to the gills with loonies, but I couldn't imagine someone would be *so* crazy as to throw something like that down . . . No, it was very possible that might happen in this city. All you had to do was look at the nightly news to be reassured of that.

And speaking of the nightly news, it was right there that everything bad began. A few days after the stone fell, I was watching the news and shaking my head at a particularly awful story about a mass murder in Westchester County. A man had entered a pizza parlor in White Plains and, taking out a submachine gun, opened fire on everyone. He killed ten people before the police arrived and shot him. The newscaster gave the report with the same serious but bland tone of voice he used for

every item. These explosions of horror have become so much a part of our lives that no one seems surprised anymore; even newspapers run them only on page ten, next to the weather report. People's indifference and acceptance of this growing madness scared me. We grow astonished and indignant when we hear about what happened to the Jews in Nazi Germany, but the same is happening in our everyday life and our only response is to shrug and either turn the page or the channel.

"Why are there so many of these things happening now? Why does it all get worse and worse?"

The dog's only response was to wag his tail and look hopefully at me: were we going out?

I sighed and got up to get his leash. By the time I'd reached the door, he was already next to me, bumping up against my leg. I looked at him and realized how big he'd grown in the time we'd been together. I forgot exactly when Sarah would be back, but for many reasons, most of them trivial and sweet, I'd be kind of sorry to give him back to her. I still didn't want to own a dog, but I could well understand why so many people loved them.

"Come on, boy, let's go." I clipped him onto the line and went out of the door. Sarah's return started me thinking. Exactly how long had I had him? I finally figured out almost two months.

Outside it was raining in a gentle, summery way: nice walking weather if you didn't mind getting a little wet.

As we were going out of the building, a man and a woman walked by, heads close under an umbrella, rich sexy voices closing them off from any world other than their own lucky one. We were close enough to them for the woman to accidentally bump into Mailbox, who let out a surprised little yelp. The woman immediately stopped and bent down.

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry! Did I hurt you?” Even in the rain I could see she was one of those great New York women, full of chic and warm perfume smells and enough allure to drive you crazy. What was nicest, though, was that she appeared genuinely worried that she’d hurt the dog. While her friend waited, she stayed down petting and tickling Mailbox, trying to make up for what she’d done. He forgot what had happened and started jumping around, playing and nipping at her friendly hand.

His eyes began to grow yellower and yellower. Even in that rainy dark, they were bright fire. I looked quickly at the woman. Remembering the dog must be six months old now; remembering what Kak had said about the origins of the breed. For one second I reeled dizzily, thinking what it all meant. That is, if it were true.

“Come on, Jennifer, let’s go.”

“One second. Isn’t he adorable? Look at those funny yellow eyes. They’re like little flashlights!”

“Honey, we’ve got to go. The show starts in ten minutes.”

From her squatting position, the woman looked up at him with such astonishing evil and hatred in her eyes, in her expression, that it felt like pure radiation. That anger could do anything, that was sure.

My God, who was she?

She got up, her face still a mushroom cloud of viciousness. Without a second’s pause, she strode off down the street, leaving her embarrassed man behind. He looked at me, shrugged helplessly, and moved off after her.

Stunned by what happened, I stood there not knowing what to do. A werewolf? *That* beautiful woman? It was impossible. I heard the skittering sound of wheels and saw a young black boy coming down the street on a skateboard. When he got to us, he braked skillfully and bent down to pet the dog.

“Hey, I know this dog. It’s a Zoondel, right?”

“Yeah, uh, right.”

"Can I pet him?"

"Sure." I kept watching the couple walk down the street. The man caught up with her and waved his hands around.

When I looked down at the boy playing with my dog, the first things I saw were the eyes. They were yellow.

"These dogs cost a fortune, huh?"

Bright yellow.

"Come on, Mailbox! Let's go!" I yanked him hard and pulled him behind me down the street.

"Hey, mister, what're you doin'?"

I bent down and scooped the dog into my arms. I started running.

"Hey, white chump!"

I ran and ran until I got home. Without thinking, I skipped the elevator and ran up five flights of stairs to my floor. If it were true, if they really were werewolves as Kak had said, why hadn't they tried to kill the dog, like the person who'd thrown the stone at us? I closed the door behind me and locked it fast. Putting Mailbox down, I looked into his eyes. They were dark again.

I watched the news again that night and found the answer to my questions. I think. I found them when I saw the latest report of the mass murder in White Plains. The killer was reported to be a quiet man who'd never done anything strange in his life. Just one day loaded a submachine gun and started killing people. It happens all the time, doesn't it?

That's the answer. It happens all the time because these people don't know who they are until *it* happens. Then they know. The woman and the boy on the street don't know yet, but they will. They will after they have done something horrible and evil and inhuman, like the quiet man with the machine gun. If they'd seen Mailbox after that then, like the person in the window, they would have tried to kill him. But until that time, they think he's only a sweet little dog, just six months old. And that was the answer to my earlier question. Why are so many of these terrible things happening these days? Because if

it's true and Mailbox can "tell," then the world is once again full of these . . . things. God help us.

How do I know this? Or rather, how can I *say* this? Because I went out one more time that night to see if I was right. I let anyone touch the dog who wanted to. Twenty-three. I counted twenty-three people alone in this small part of this large city who touched my dog and made him glow.



WOLF TRAIN WEST

William Messner-Loebs

William Messner-Loebs is known throughout the world of comics as a writer and artist for such titles as *Jonny Quest*, *The Flash*, *Wonder Woman*, *Thor*, *The Maxx*, *Epicurus the Sage*, and the compelling historical series *Journey: The Adventures of Wolverine McAlistaire*. He was even tapped by the State Department to produce a comic for the South American market on the dangers of land mines.

“Wolf Train West” was written for an anthology of adventure stories and features the action and wit typical of Messner-Loebs’s best comics work. As for the introduction of werewolves to the tale, the author explains, “I had been listening to a lot of 1930s folk songs about riding the rails and how railroad bulls would be hired to harass other poor people who tried to get on the trains. It seemed to me that becoming a werewolf was a pretty good analogy for the way we are forced to scab against one another to protect the rich and powerful.”

GRANGERFORD MOVED toward the train tracks, tripping and sliding on the ice. The temperature had been drifting downward, and the air was cracked and eyes were gummed together. Now, as he ran, the air stabbed through his lungs like a knife. There was icy fog all around him, generated by the steam leaking from every joint of the huffing iron behemoth. His sister, Patsy, running behind him, was almost ghosted away in the mist.

Grangerford had aimed to catch a boxcar that was weathered and unpainted, its huge sliding door gaping open a couple of feet. The train had slowed down for a long curve as it left the Chicago station yard, and it had seemed possible to reach it and haul himself and his sister on board without making racket enough to attract the railroad bulls. But his frozen fingers kept missing the rough boards and with every step he was falling farther behind. Fat, stinging flakes cut into his face. Once he had the impression of a dark, hairy form scrabbling along the top of the boxcar. He blinked and the thing had vanished. *Must've been my own hair in my eyes*, he thought.

Suddenly, a long arm shot out from the boxcar and pulled him up. It was a strong pull. At first he felt like he was flying and then he hit the hay covering the boxcar floor with knees and elbow and face. All the air went out of him in a solid *whoosh*.

Grangerford was winded, but he fought against it. He crawled back to the door, struggled to his knees, and grabbed Patsy by one cold little hand. Then he began to pull. His head was awl with the impact and hunger; he was off-balance and exhausted and would have fallen out of the car and onto the girl, burying them both in the frigid, treacherous snow—except a bulky figure knelt beside him and helped draw her in. Grangerford hugged the thin girl until she mewed and finally squirmed away from him. Together they rolled the door shut and then brushed the snow from their clothes and faces.

The stranger who had helped them had already crawled back into a corner. It was impossible to see him clearly in the dimness, but he wasn't a threat. Why would he have helped them, if he were? More importantly he was ignoring them. Disinterest in these days was a blessing, when every street tough was a Dead Rabbit or some other hooligan, who might kill an eight-year-old for a crust of bread. Thinking of other gangsters, Grangerford looked quickly about. He knew hoboese traveled in groups in the cars, and it was their bad luck if they fell in with a batch of cruel, desperate men. Fortunately, the stranger appeared to be alone.

It seemed a century since that morning, when they had crept out of the rear window of the workhouse and run for the rail yard, halfway across the city. Grangerford knew the way. How could he not? Every night he would fall asleep on his pallet in his little attic corner, listening to the mournful whistle of the train as it left for the terrible, wonderful open spaces of the West.

Grangerford knew very little about the Indian Territory, but that didn't stop him from talking about the subject for hours, while his sister stared at him in slack-jawed wonder. The civilized East was spiraling down and down in the Panic of 1893, with breadlines stuffed with desperate men and the papers filled with stories of gang wars and violent crime in the streets. The West seemed to him a place of adventurous refuge. There, noble savages and buckskin-clad frontiersmen rode over endless prairies; living great lives free of the petty meannesses and sullen warped anger of the East.

Grangerford sighed as he lay back in the boxcar. The straw was warm in comparison with the wind outside. The rough board walls stretched high overhead into blackness. It reminded him somehow of a church. Weak gray light came through the cracks between the boards. On the whole it smelled of cows. Doubtless cattle had been shipped here from Kansas City to the slaughterhouses. Now the cars were headed back, almost

empty. Almost because along the front end of the car, opposite the spot where the big tramp had established himself, a mass of wooden crates were piled as high as two men standing. They took up a third of the boxcar's length. The boy realized this was in their favor; the crates being piled in the direction the train was going helped break the wind and kept the car warmer. The boy idly kicked at the straw, and a large clump of brown odium popped out of the hay.

"Oooo," said Patsy. "Crapoo."

It seemed a good plan to establish their own little fiefdom of hay and cow dung. Grangerford carefully shifted Patsy down the car until the boxes were against their backs. Patsy obeyed willingly. She was three years younger than her tow-headed brother. Her eyes and hair were dark. There was a lot of their father in her; his moodiness, at least, and his talent for making things. She helped Grangerford build up a dike of straw.

Grangerford had known their father for only a short period, but he had seemed like a big husk of a man, gristled, hollowed out with worry, and sodden with drink. He sometimes snarled at his son for being "a laze and a dream-headed layabout." He said Patsy was "a simpering little animal." He had never hit his children but, save for insults, he never really spoke to them, either. When he left them at the workhouse and vanished, it had been almost a relief. Patsy no longer remembered him.

Grangerford had more of their mother in him. At least he hoped there was. She was a kind of cheerful, fading memory for him, and the only way he had left to preserve her was to be like her. Mostly what he remembered was a bedridden ghost nursing a tiny baby girl, singing lullabies in Gaelic.

Patsy was smoothing her worn dark dress, of a sort all the workhouse girls wore. She was huddled in a faded and torn blue-checked cape someone had donated. Grangerford noticed she had cleverly twisted hay-straws around and about two chunks of cow dung in a weave to produce what looked to be a kind of doll—if you didn't look too close. Grangerford was momentarily

appalled, but he realized the dung was dried out, so he kept his peace. Patsy informed him the straw-dung combination was named Baby. He solemnly accepted the bundle to hold.

“Fordie?” tremored Patsy. “How long ’fore we reach St. Louis? Baby’s cold.” Then, as an afterthought, “Hungry, too.”

Grangerford thought of the glittering club cars half a mile ahead, filled with noise and light and heat—and incomprehensibly good things to eat. The people in those cars he imagined as sleek and happy in evening clothes and party dresses, laughing in a carefree way. But that world was as unreachable as the court of the Mongol Emperor in China. The train might roll to other states, might go up through Canada or down to Mexico, but those cars would remain the same distance away.

“We’ll get some food later, Patsy,” said Grangerford. “Huddle close now and I’ll tell you ’bout the Texas Rangers an’ how they caught old Sitting Bull.”

He began the story in a low, singsong voice. It was based on a magazine story he’d once read, but by this time it was three-quarters his own invention. When the heroic Sitting Bull saved the two lost children of the brave commander of the Texas Rangers, who then allowed the chief to escape and return to his people, Grangerford heard a derisive “huugh!” from the opposite end of the car.

Crouched there, wrapped in a worn and filthy coat and with an old slouch hat pulled over his face, was the tramp who had helped them. The man was a tall, gaunt scarecrow, huddled in rags. Grangerford had guessed instinctively that he wanted no company. But now he spoke.

“Where’d you hear that stretcher, boy?” He extended a leg and waggled the foot in a worn boot to work the stiffness out of it. The boy wondered how long he’d been crouched in the boxcar.

“Read it,” said Grangerford defensively. “In a real book. It ain’t a lie, neither. Everybody knows the Injuns is as wild and

free as the air and fierce and honorable as wolves. The only thing more honorable than an Injun is a Texas Ranger."

This drew a low laugh from the stranger.

"I won't arguey that, I guess," he said. "But them folks—both the settlers and the Injuns—been fightin' and hatin' each other for fifty years now, and that kinda hate don't make a man better. 'Sides, there ain't no more free tribes in the West. Most are herded on to reservations, or they're in tiny, starving bands, mis'r'ble and depraved."

There was a storm raging outside. The boy wondered if it had grown from the few flakes and the icy fog they had run through, or if the train was heading into the storm. Occasionally the car was buffeted by an especially strong gust of wind. From far away came a long, mournful howl.

"Doggie," remarked Patsy. "He's hungry."

The tramp nodded. "Prob'ly is. But that ain't no dog." He took the opportunity to scratch himself. "That there's a wolf."

At that, each sat for a while with his or her private thoughts. Grangerford watched as little spurts of snow came through the chinks between the boards. He wondered if it was getting colder, or if it felt colder to him since he had not moved for a while. Beside him Patsy was working on another doll. This one was long and squat, with four short straws driven into its underside. He realized she was trying to make a dog. Grangerford tried to imagine a wolf running through the snowdrifts, howling. It seemed like a sad, cold business to be about. The tramp was fooling with something under his coat. There was a series of *snick, snick, snicks*. The boy realized he was loading a gun.

The man caught the boy's eye. "If something happens, something bad, you two should jump up on that first crate you're against and get down on t'other side."

Grangerford stared at him. "Somethin' bad?" he asked.

The tramp ignored his question, returning instead to their earlier talk about the West. "I know'd a Injun once. I reckon he *was* fierce and honorable, after a fashion. Sure was smart. He

could pick up a language just like that.” He snapped his fingers. “He spoke twenty or thirty Injun tongues. He was at home in French and Spanish, and a’ course American. And Dutch. Swedish, too. That’n was a surprise.” The tramp grinned at some memory. “He could track a snake over glass. People liked him. Even folks that didn’t like Injuns would talk to him. Folks didn’t talk to me. I scairt ’em.”

“Why’d you scare them?” The boy thought the man was more sad than frightening.

“Reckon you should ask them. . . .”

The tramp fumbled in his shirt and drew out a bulky package wrapped in oilcloth. When he flipped it open, he revealed sliced bread, pickles, and several slabs of ham. “I visited that kitchen car up yonder early this morning. I don’t see how they’d miss these few scraps.”

The children ate silently, but with great attention. When they were done, Grangerford stretched out on the straw.

“What happened to him? The Injun, I mean.”

“He found hisself a squaw—a Mormon girl that was stole off by the Comanch’ years before. We got her back, but she had taken to the blanket. She didn’t have no use for white society and her family had no use for her. But the Injun said he loved her, so they went off together.”

The boy guessed the story didn’t end there. “And then what happened?”

“You remember what I told you ’bout the whites an’ Injuns hatin’ each other? Well, the town went a little mad. Seems they couldn’t stand the notion of a white girl goin’ off with a Injun to breed a passel o’ half-breed pups. They tracked ’em to their little cabin. Funny thing was, they hated Mormons, too.”

“And they killed them?” Even though he had never met the Indian or the Mormon girl, the thought of the long-ago crime made Grangerford’s throat seize up.

“Would have if they’d been alone. Now that was what I call

a fight.” The tramp’s mouth curved in a lazy smile. “Did I tell you that Injun saved my life long ago? Well, that day I paid him back.”

There didn’t seem much to say to that. The boy was quiet imagining the long-ago scene. He pulled his Barlowe knife from his pocket and folded it open.

But now a series of loud noises, almost like screams or sharp barks, could be heard over the wind. The big man raised his hand in warning. “Hesh,” he said.

There were no further sounds but the tramp remained taunt; he was listening. The boy cocked an ear, as well. There was no noise but the wind. Finally Grangerford said, “I thought there was only freight on these cars.”

“Should be. But I checked out a few of ’em last night. Ever since troopers broke the strike folks have been leaving best they c’n. I found fourteen in the car next to this ’un and a family of six in the car beyond that. There warn’t none in the other three cars I looked in. Jes’ blood in the straw.”

Grangerford looked at him. “Blood?”

“I heard tell the railroads hired a special squad of railroad bulls to shoo out the tramps.”

The stranger said this in a quiet, almost informational tone of voice, as if he were talking about the price of tea or how to tie a good knot. There was ice in Grangerford’s belly, however, and the boy found it difficult to breathe. For the first time he realized that he was and Patsy *were* tramps, hoboes just like this man and the other disreputables hiding in straw on this train. They were beyond the law, and folks would read about them in the newspaper and *tetch-tetch* if they were caught. Or say it was their own fault if they died.

From above came an indescribable sliding, scrabbling noise.

There was a period of silence, while the two children hugged each other, and the tramp looked upward, toward the rough boards that formed the ceiling of the car. Then Grangerford

scooped up Patsy and scrambled back behind the boxes, where the tramp had suggested they hide if trouble came.

There came a *thunk* from above, and then another *thunk*, and then another. The trap door on the roof was wrenched open. A rope uncoiled through the hole, shimmering through the falling snow, and a heavy-limbed, bulky figure slid down the rope, quick as lightning. That figure was followed by a second, gangly and tall. They were both wrapped in old coats, and mostly covered in snow. It amazed Grangerford that they could have managed to clamber over the tops of the cars in this blizzard.

The first man, red-skinned with cold, was older and bearded, with a derby hat tied to his head with a scarf. The second man was younger and redheaded, with a jaw slanted toward idiocy. They were smiling, and they were carrying weapons. The first man had a Bowie knife, the second a baseball bat. The former surveyed the car, slowly approaching the children, as if he could see straight through the wood of the crates.

"Come out, come out, dirty little lice," he crooned in a not unfriendly way. "You know what we do to thieves on this train?"

The older man stood directly over them now, and there seemed nothing for it but to stand up. As Grangerford did, he glanced over to the corner where the tramp had been crouching. He was gone.

"I'll tell you what we do," the older man snarled. "We judge 'em."

Grangerford had a hard time looking straight at him, for the man had a sty in one eye and the other eye wandered. It was like the eyes were two separate animals, imprisoned in the leering face.

"We ain't thieves," said the boy. "We never took nothing."

"A'course you did. You took space." The man licked a long, rough tongue over his yellowed, broken teeth, which Grangerford noticed for the first time were pointed. "Don't you know that all the space in the world is owned by somebody? When you take up that space, you gotta pay 'em. And when you don't pay 'em, why, then, you be a thief."

"Not out West you don't have to pay," said Grangerford. "Ain't nobody owns the space out there."

"Don't talk like a idiot, boy. A'course somebody owns it."

The man slid long, bony fingers over his Bowie knife, and the younger man chuckled like a jackass. Grangerford could feel Patsy squirming behind him, trying to make herself even smaller than she was. He raised his own knife as boldly as he could muster.

"Rich folk own all the space that matters," the older man continued, ignoring the boy's threat. "The railroads own it. They own rights of way on either side of the track that go on for the size of Rhode Island. Ain't no place a feller can squat, or eat, or farm that the railroads don't own. Which brings us to you and your criminal nature." He came still closer, and Grangerford put a hand defensively behind him to comfort Patsy. "I assume you got no ticket to them boards you be squattin' on?"

"We don't, but we ain't hurtin' nothin'. We just needed a ride to the West."

"You needed. You *needed*?" mocked the man. "There be the criminal in you talkin'! You needed somethin' and so you took it! I suppose if somebody owned the air and you needed a breath you'd just take that, too?"

Something kept Grangerford arguing with the man, a childish stubbornness or perhaps just a desire to keep the men's attention away from Patsy. "Nobody owns the air."

"Don't be too sure! You know how you c'n tell the good folk, the one's who got a right to live? They own things and they can hire the strong to perrect those things from a lot of criminals." The red-haired citizen bobbed his chin at this and did a little dance. His partner laughed. "You know who we are?"

"Railroad bulls."

This came from the tramp, who was back, but leaning against the wall on the other side of the car. The boy was uncommonly grateful to see him.

"Bullies," the tramp rumbled. "We heard you throwin' folks

off the other freight cars into the storm.”

The other man started a bit, surprised that he and his partner hadn’t noticed the hobo before. But he recovered quickly.

“That’s right as rain. Well, we didn’t throw nobody off at first—not till we was done with them. We’re detectives. The railroad hires us to control criminals and to punish ’em.” Again he licked his lips. Grangerford was surprised to see that the teeth seemed sharper and longer. “Lucas, open up the car door.”

“Yessir, Micah! Yessir.”

As Lucas moved, Grangerford noticed that the man’s red hair was much shaggier than he’d first thought. It covered arms that dangled from his worn cuffs as he veritably loped from eagerness. The boy glanced at the older man—Micah, his partner had called him. His nose seemed to project more from his face than before, almost like a muzzle. In fact, the face itself was hairier than before, the eyes blacker and more feral.

They are wolves, Grangerford thought hopelessly, not knowing how this could be.

Micah squatted on his heels and regarded the children with hot, greedy eyes. “We’d be worthless, same as you, with no place to live and nothin’ to our names, if we didn’t have the railroads to let us have a place to den and feed.”

“Feed, eh?” said the tramp. He still leaned against the wall. Grangerford was stunned to see that the man seemed unconcerned by the strange scene playing out before him. “So that’s what this is about. I figur’d there was somethin’ off about you two.”

“You don’t know nothin’, bohunk,” Lucas snarled.

“I suspect I do. . . .”

Micah nodded his lengthening muzzle. “Three months ago we come upon this poor, damned Eye-talian peddler infected with the wolf disease. He wanted nothing more than to die and be done with the cycles of the moon. Well, we helped him die right enough. We tossed him in an iron smelter.”

“But he got his teeth on you first,” the tramp said.

"No," Micah replied smugly, "we made him bite us. We knew if we was like him we'd have a skill the railroads would pay for. But it turned out we warn't quite like him." He smirked with his increasingly lupine mouth. "We chose this life, so we can use the power. It don't use us. The moon changed him, but we can change as we want, as long as the blood hunger stirs in us."

"And it's stirring now."

This last came from Lucas, who was enjoying the story a bit too much, as Grangerford saw it. The boy guessed the terror their victims felt helped these men become monsters—as they were fast becoming now. He tried then not to be afraid, but it was no good. His bones felt like water and he felt utterly helpless, despite the Barlowe knife still in his hand.

Micah turned to the slaving idiot wolf. "Throw out the old bum first. We keep the lambs for meat and fun."

"No!"

Grangerford raced toward the thing with his knife, but was seized by a hairy claw preternaturally quick and strong, and hurled against the rear wall. He lay there, stunned, as the wolf-man approached, blood up and snarling. Then he paused and stared at his hand. It was pierced through and through with the Barlowe knife. Blood dripped down the fur. The creature known as Micah smiled.

"Neither iron nor steel can hurt us, boy. And those things that can harm us ain't likely to be carried by critters like you."

He tossed the knife away and held up his bleeding hand. The slash was foul looking and as wide as Grangerford's thumb. But it had already commenced to heal. The boy stared helplessly as the edges of the wound tugged together. The bleeding stopped. The flesh healed over, leaving naught as much as a scar.

Lucas laughed, slapping his thighs. "Ain't that a thing, Micah? Lookit his eyes. He can't b'lieve it, not a-tall. Lookit him squirm! He's scairt o' us now! You bet he is!" He turned to the tramp. "How 'bout you, bohunk? You scairt, too?"

The hobo slowly shook his head, but Micah snapped, "Shet up, Lucas. A'course they's scairt. Folks has a right to be scairt of us. We are the new thing, the new men f'r the new century up-coming. We are efficient, cold as ice, and hard as granite. Nobody kin stand before us."

With the same terrible quickness as before Micah reached down and grabbed Patsy. He dangled her by one arm while she screamed. Grangerford scrambled over and desperately clung to her legs. He was crying, screaming, but the creature was too strong. Inch by inch he dragged the girl's pink, dirty throat closer to his grin. The idiot Lucas began to howl. Micah joined him. Then the older wolf-thing's jaws gaped.

Two shots crashed and the older railroad bull was thrown back. Micah seemed confused and in pain, though he was too heavily cloaked to show much blood. He dropped Patsy and stared at his arm. Two holes smoked up by his shoulder. A third shot hurled him nearly to the wall. There was a keening deep in his throat as he turned toward the tramp.

The hobo had drawn a revolver from under his coat. The red-haired idiot lurched toward him. Still leaning against the wall, the tramp fired again, catching Lucas under the arm. The shaggy one screamed wildly and fell sidewise. Again the wound smoked and sizzled.

Micah started forward with ferocity, but a bullet caught him in the throat. He spun backward and was lost out the door into the storm. For a moment all was calm, then Lucas snarled and, grabbing his baseball bat, leapt forward. The tramp fired again, and the bat flew from his attacker's grip. For a moment Lucas swayed. Then, he panicked and half-fell, half-jumped off the train.

The battle had taken only an instant. The car was silent, save for the keening of the wind. Grangerford got up to slide shut the door, treading as he did so upon the finger of the red-haired man, shot off in the ruckus. It was covered with silky red

hair and still writhed disconcerting. Grangerford threw it out with the bat, then slammed the door closed.

“You shot him in the hand?”

The tramp put away his gun. “Yep. Old habits die hard.”

“You can shoot good enough to hit someone in the hand as he’s comin’ at you,” said Grangerford, astonished. “Where’d you learn?”

“Texas.”

“Were you a Ranger?”

“For a while.”

Patsy had been sniffing quietly through all this, clinging to her brother’s arm. Now she looked up at him with tear-reddened eyes. “Why’d he leave us alone with ’em?”

“I was here the whole time,” the hobo said. “Sorta hidin’ in plain sight. It was a trick. Somethin’ that Injun friend o’ mine taught me.”

Patsy turned her gaze on the stranger. “But why’d you wait so long to help me and Fordie?”

“I wouldn’t’a let ’em hurt you bad, missy. But if yer travelin’ out West, you need to see some things for yerself first. . . .”

The tramp seemed to have nothing more to say, but the boy had forgotten his fear and was exploding with wonder.

“How’d you know how t’ fight ’em?” he asked breathlessly. “You seen them wolf-folk before?”

“A bit. Every country and most tribes have were-people. Or animals that turn into humans. It amounts to the same. I’ve seen ’em both. And you kill ’em the same.”

The stranger reached into his pocket and handed the boy something. It was a bullet, cast out of silver. “Any lawmen cuts one of these out of those critters, they’ll know who got ’em.”

Grangerford looked at the bullet, then up at his benefactor. The man’s face was not unkind, but seamed with age and toil. Although it had been winter for months, his skin was still sunburned, dark from years in the sun and wind, except for a

narrow strip around the eyes. It was as if he had worn a mask, though the boy could not imagine why he would do such a thing. "Will anybody find the bodies? When the snow melts, I mean?"

"There's a deal of lonesome space along this track. I ain't worried. We'd best turn in." The man smiled. He lay down and pulled his hat over his eyes.

The children did their best to nest, but Grangerford had one more question.

"If you was a Ranger, did you have a horse?"

The man stirred. "I did. But in the end I let him. Times was tough." And then he was asleep.

Grangerford looked at Patsy, and made sure she, too, was breathing peacefully before he could finally relax. He stared up at the hole in the roof, watching the cloudy sky pass by. The snow was still falling, but somehow it no longer worried him. He and Patsy would survive. They had seen the worst the world could manage and it had not destroyed them. He found himself smiling.

The train, gleaming like a thousand diamonds amid the smoke and steam, continued on into the darkness of the West.



THE WIFE'S STORY

Ursula K. Le Guin

As of 2010, **Ursula K. Le Guin** has published twenty-one novels, eleven volumes of short stories, three collections of essays, twelve books for children, six volumes of poetry and four of translation. Her best-known fantasy works, the six Books of Earthsea, have sold millions of copies in America and England, and have been translated into sixteen languages. Her first major work of science fiction, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, is considered epoch-making in the field for its radical investigation of gender roles and its moral and literary complexity. Le Guin has received many awards, including multiple Hugos and Nebulas, a Pushcart Prize, a National Book Award, and a PEN/Malamud Award. Her most recent publications include a volume of poetry, *Incredible Good Fortune*; the novel *Lavinia*; and an essay collection, *Cheek by Jowl*. She lives in Portland, Oregon.

First published in 1982, "The Wife's Story" is a memorable exploration of the themes of family, community, and identity, as well as a masterful inversion of the traditional werewolf tale.

HE WAS A GOOD . . . I don't understand it. I don't believe . . . happened. I saw it happen but it isn't . . . always gentle. If you'd have seen him playing with the children, anybody who saw him with the children would have known that there wasn't any bad in him, not one mean bone. When I first met him he was still living with his mother, over near Spring Lake, and I used to see them together, the mother and the sons, and think that any young fellow that was that nice with his family must be one worth knowing. Then one time when I was walking in the woods I met him by himself coming back from a hunting trip. He hadn't got any game at all, not so much as a field mouse, but he wasn't cast down about it. He was just larking along enjoying the morning air. That's one of the things I first loved about him. He didn't take things hard, he didn't grouch and whine when things didn't go his way. So we got to talking that day. And I guess things moved right along after that, because pretty soon he was over here pretty near all the time. And my sister said—see, my parents had moved out the year before and gone south, leaving us the place—my sister said, kind of teasing but serious, “Well! If he's going to be here every day and half the night, I guess there isn't room for me!” And she moved out—just down the way. We've always been real close, her and me. That's the sort of thing doesn't ever change. I couldn't ever have got through this bad time without my sis.

Well, so he come to live here. And all I can say is, it was the happy year of my life. He was just purely good to me. A hard worker and never lazy, and so big and fine-looking. Everybody looked up to him, you know, young as he was. Lodge Meeting nights, more and more often they had him to lead the singing. He had such a beautiful voice, and he'd lead off strong, and the others following and joining in, high voices and low. It brings the shivers on me now to think of it, hearing it, nights when I'd stayed home from meeting when the children was babies—the

singing coming up through the trees there, and the moonlight, summer nights, the full moon shining. I'll never hear anything so beautiful. I'll never know a joy like that again.

It was the moon, that's what they say. It's the moon's fault, and the blood. It was in his father's blood. I never knew his father, and now I wonder what become of him. He was from up Whitewater way, and had no kin around here. I always thought he went back there, but now I don't know. There was some talk about him, tales, that come out after what happened to my husband. It's something runs in the blood, they say, and it may never come out, but if it does, it's the change of the moon that does it. Always it happens in the dark of the moon. When everybody's home and asleep. Something comes over the one that's got the curse in his blood, they say, and he gets up because he can't sleep, and goes out into the glaring sun, and goes off all alone—drawn to find those like him.

And it may be so, because my husband would do that. I'd half rouse and say, "Where you going to?" and he'd say, "Oh, hunting, be back this evening," and it wasn't like him, even his voice was different. But I'd be so sleepy, and not wanting to wake the kids, and he was so good and responsible, it was no call of mine to go asking "Why?" and "Where?" and all like that.

So it happened that way maybe three times or four. He'd come back late, and worn out, and pretty near cross for one so sweet-tempered—not wanting to talk about it. I figured everybody got to bust out now and then, and nagging never helped anything. But it did begin to worry me. Not so much that he went, but that he come back so tired and strange. Even, he smelled strange. It made my hair stand up on end. I could not endure it and I said, "What is that—those smells on you? All over you!" And he said, "I don't know," real short, and made like he was sleeping. But he went down when he thought I wasn't noticing, and washed and washed himself. But those smells stayed in his hair, and in our bed, for days.

And then the awful thing. I don't find it easy to tell about

this. I want to cry when I have to bring it to my mind. Our youngest, the little one, my baby, she turned from her father. Just overnight. He come in and she got scared-looking, stiff, with her eyes wide, and then she begun to cry and try to hide behind me. She didn't yet talk plain but she was saying over and over, "Make it go away! Make it go away!"

The look in his eyes, just for one moment, when he heard that. That's what I don't want ever to remember. That's what I can't forget. The look in his eyes looking at his own child.

I said to the child, "Shame on you, what's got into you!"—scolding, but keeping her right up close to me at the same time, because I was frightened too. Frightened to shaking.

He looked away then and said something like, "Guess she just waked up dreaming," and passed it off that way. Or tried to. And so did I. And I got real mad with my baby when she kept on acting crazy scared of her own dad. But she couldn't help it and I couldn't change it.

He kept away that whole day. Because he knew, I guess. It was just beginning dark of the moon.

It was hot and close inside, and dark, and we'd all been asleep some while, when something woke me up. He wasn't there beside me. I heard a little stir in the passage, when I listened. So I got up, because I could bear it no longer. I went out into the passage, and it was light there, hard sunlight coming in from the door. And I saw him standing just outside, in the tall grass by the entrance. His head was hanging. Presently he sat down, like he felt weary, and looked down at his feet. I held still, inside, and watched—I didn't know what for.

And I saw what he saw. I saw the changing. In his feet, it was, first. They got long, each foot got longer, stretching out, the toes stretching out and the foot getting long, and fleshy, and white. And no hair on them.

The hair begun to come away all over his body. It was like his hair fried away in the sunlight and was gone. He was white all over, then, like a worm's skin. And he turned his face. It was

changing while I looked. It got flatter and flatter, the mouth flat and wide, and the teeth grinning flat and dull, and the nose just a knob of flesh with nostril holes, and the ears gone, and the eyes gone blue—blue, with white rims around the blue—staring at me out of that flat, soft, white face.

He stood up then on two legs.

I saw him, I had to see him, my own dear love, turned into the hateful one.

I couldn't move, but as I crouched there in the passage staring out into the day I was trembling and shaking with a growl that burst out into a crazy, awful howling. A grief howl and a terror howl and a calling howl. And the others heard it, even sleeping, and woke up.

It stared and peered, that thing my husband had turned into, and shoved its face up to the entrance of our house. I was still bound by mortal fear, but behind me the children had waked up, and the baby was whimpering. The mother anger come into me then, and I snarled and crept forward.

The man thing looked around. It had no gun, like the ones from the man places do. But it picked up a heavy fallen tree branch in its long white foot, and shoved the end of that down into our house, at me. I snapped the end of it in my teeth and started to force my way out, because I knew the man would kill our children if it could. But my sister was already coming. I saw her running at the man with her head low and her mane high and her eyes yellow as the winter sun. It turned on her and raised up that branch to hit her. But I come out of the doorway, mad with the mother anger, and the others all were coming answering my call, the whole pack gathering, there in that blind glare and heat of the sun at noon.

The man looked round at us and yelled out loud, and brandished the branch it held. Then it broke and ran, heading for the cleared fields and plowlands, down the mountainside. It ran, on two legs, leaping and weaving, and we followed it.

I was last, because love still bound the anger and the fear

in me. I was running when I saw them pull it down. My sister's teeth were in its throat. I got there and it was dead. The others were drawing back from the kill, because of the taste of the blood, and the smell. The younger ones were cowering and some crying, and my sister rubbed her mouth against her forelegs over and over to get rid of the taste. I went up close because I thought if the thing was dead the spell, the curse must be done, and my husband could come back—alive, or even dead, if I could only see him, my true love, in his true form, beautiful. But only the dead man lay there white and bloody. We drew back and back from it, and turned and ran, back up into the hills, back to the woods of the shadows and the twilight and the blessed dark.



THE HERO AS WERWOLF

Gene Wolfe

For more than four decades, **Gene Wolfe** has published remarkable novels and stories that challenge readers and dazzle critics. His most famous work to date, the four-volume Book of the New Sun, debuted in 1980 with the release of *The Shadow of the Torturer*. The series would go on to collect Nebula, Campbell, World Fantasy, and British Science Fiction awards and to cement Wolfe's reputation for a compelling and highly allusive writing style. His most recent novels include *Pirate Freedom*, *An Evil Guest*, and *The Sorcerer's House*.

Werewolves appear regularly in Wolfe's work, sometimes openly, sometimes in more subtle guises. In an afterword to "The Hero as Werwolf" in *The Best of Gene Wolfe*, the author notes that the old Anglo-Saxon spelling of *werewolf* in the title has been the subject of some debate, but was done to conjure a specific meaning: "Our werewolf is a man who becomes a wolf. The manwolf envisioned by the Angles and the Saxons was a man to be feared as wolves were feared, and for the same reasons." No matter how fearsome its protagonist, the evocatively named Paul Gorou, "The Hero as Werwolf" is at its core a story about the nature of love.



Feet in the jungle that leave no mark!
Eyes that can see in the dark—the dark!
Tongue—give tongue to it! Hark! O Hark!
Once, twice and again!

—RUDYARD KIPLING,
“Hunting Song of the Seeonee Pack”

AN OWL SHRIEKED, and Paul flinched. Fear, pavement, flesh, death, stone, dark, loneliness, and blood made up Paul's world; the blood was all much the same, but the fear took several forms, and he had hardly seen another human being in the four years since his mother's death. At a night meeting in the park he was the red-cheeked young man at the end of the last row, with his knees together and his scrupulously clean hands (Paul was particularly careful about his nails) in his lap.

The speaker was fluent and amusing; he was clearly conversant with his subject—whatever it was—and he pleased his audience. Paul, the listener and watcher, knew many of the words he used; yet he had understood nothing in the past hour and a half, and sat wrapped in his stolen cloak and his own thoughts, seeming to listen, watching the crowd and the park—this, at least, was no ghost-house, no trap; the moon was up, night-blooming flowers scented the park air, and the trees lining the paths glowed with self-generated blue light; in the city, beyond the last hedge, the great buildings new and old were mountains lit from within.

Neither human nor master, a policeman strolled about the fringes of the audience, his eyes bright with stupidity. Paul could have killed him in less than a second, and was enjoying a dream of the policeman's death in some remote corner of his mind even while he concentrated on seeming to be one of

them. A passenger rocket passed just under the stars, trailing luminous banners.

The meeting was over and he wondered if the rocket had in some way been the signal to end it. The masters did not use time, at least not as he did, as he had been taught by the thin woman who had been his mother in the little home she had made for them in the turret of a house that was once (she said) the Gorous'—now only a house too old to be destroyed. Neither did they use money, of which he like other old-style *Homo sapiens* still retained some racial memory, as of a forgotten god—a magic once potent that had lost all force.

The masters were rising, and there were tears and laughter and that third emotional tone that was neither amusement nor sorrow—the silken sound humans did not possess, but that Paul thought might express content, as the purring of a cat does, or community, like the cooing of doves. The policeman bobbed his hairy head, grinning, basking in the recognition, the approval, of those who had raised him from animality. *See* (said the motions of his hands, the writhings of his body) *the clothing you have given me. How nice! I take good care of my things because they are yours. See my weapon. I perform a useful function—if you did not have me, you would have to do it yourselves.*

If the policeman saw Paul, it would be over. The policeman was too stupid, too silly, to be deceived by appearances as his masters were. He would never dare, thinking him a master, to meet Paul's eye, but he would look into his face seeking approval, and would see not what he was supposed to see but what was there. Paul ducked into the crowd, avoiding a beautiful woman with eyes the color of pearls, preferring to walk in the shadow of her fat escort where the policeman would not see him. The fat man took dust from a box shaped like the moon and rubbed it between his hands, releasing the smell of raspberries. It froze, and he sifted the tiny crystals of crimson ice over his shirtfront, grunting with satisfaction, then offered the box to the woman,

who refused at first, only (three steps later) to accept when he pressed it on her.

They were past the policeman now. Paul dropped a few paces behind the couple, wondering if they were the ones tonight—if there would be meat tonight at all. For some, vehicles would be waiting. If the pair he had selected were among these, he would have to find others quickly.

They were not. They had entered the canyons between the buildings; he dropped farther behind, then turned aside.

Three minutes later he was in an alley a hundred meters ahead of them, waiting for them to pass the mouth. (The old trick was to cry like an infant, and he could do it well, but he had a new trick—a better trick, because too many had learned not to come down an alley when an infant cried. The new trick was a silver bell he had found in the house, small and very old. He took it from his pocket and removed the rag he had packed around the clapper. His dark cloak concealed him now, its hood pulled up to hide the pale gleam of his skin. He stood in a narrow doorway only a few meters away from the alley's mouth.)

They came. He heard the man's thick laughter, the woman's silken sound. She was a trifle silly from the dust the man had given her, and would be holding his arm as they walked, rubbing his thighs with hers. The man's blackshod foot and big belly thrust past the stonework of the building—there was a muffled moan.

The fat man turned, looking down the alley. Paul could see fear growing in the woman's face, cutting, too slowly, through the odor of raspberries. Another moan, and the man strode forward, fumbling in his pocket for an illuminator. The woman followed hesitantly (her skirt was of flowering vines the color of love, and white skin flashed in the interstices; a serpent of gold supported her breasts).

Someone was behind him. Pressed back against the metal door, he watched the couple as they passed. The fat man had

gotten his illuminator out and held it over his head as he walked, looking into corners and doorways.

They came at them from both sides, a girl and an old, gray-bearded man. The fat man, the master, his genetic heritage revised for intellection and peace, had hardly time to turn before his mouth gushed blood. The woman whirled and ran, the vines of her skirt withering at her thought to give her legroom, the serpent dropping from her breasts to strike with fangless jaws at the flying-haired girl who pursued her, then winding itself about the girl's ankles. The girl fell; but as the pearl-eyed woman passed, Paul broke her neck. For a moment he was too startled at the sight of other human beings to speak. Then he said, "These are mine."

The old man, still bent over the fat man's body, snapped: "Ours. We've been here an hour and more." His voice was the creaking of steel hinges, and Paul thought of ghost-houses again.

"I followed them from the park." The girl, black-haired, gray-eyed when the light from the alley-mouth struck her face, was taking the serpent from around her legs—it was once more a lifeless thing of soft metal mesh. Paul picked up the woman's corpse and wrapped it in his cloak. "You gave me no warning," he said. "You must have seen me when I passed you."

The girl looked toward the old man. Her eyes said she would back him if he fought, and Paul decided he would throw the woman's body at her.

"Somebody'll come soon," the old man said. "And I'll need Janie's help to carry this one. We each take what we got ourselves—that's fair. Or we whip you. My girl's worth a man in a fight, and you'll find I'm still worth a man myself, old as I be."

"Give me the picking of his body. This one has nothing."

The girl's bright lips drew back from strong white teeth. From somewhere under the tattered shirt she wore, she had produced a long knife, and sudden light from a window high above the alley ran along the edge of the stained blade; the girl might be a dangerous opponent, as the old man claimed, but

Paul could sense the femaleness, the woman rut from where he stood. “No,” her father said. “You got good clothes. I need these.” He looked up at the window fearfully, fumbling with buttons.

“His cloak will hang on you like a blanket.”

“We’ll fight. Take the woman and go away, or we’ll fight.”

He could not carry both, and the fat man’s meat would be tainted by the testicles. When Paul was young and there had been no one but his mother to do the killing, they had sometimes eaten old males; he never did so now. He slung the pearl-eyed woman across his shoulders and trotted away.

Outside the alley the streets were well lit, and a few passersby stared at him and the dark burden he carried. Fewer still, he knew, would suspect him of being what he was—he had learned the trick of dressing as the masters did, even of wearing their expressions. He wondered how the black-haired girl and the old man would fare in their ragged clothes. *They must live very near.*

His own place was that in which his mother had borne him, a place high in a house built when humans were the masters. Every door was nailed tight and boarded up; but on one side a small garden lay between two wings, and in a corner of this garden, behind a bush where the shadows were thick even at noon, the bricks had fallen away. The lower floors were full of rotting furniture and the smell of rats and mold, but high in his wooden turret the walls were still dry and the sun came in by day at eight windows. He carried his burden there and dropped her in a corner. It was important that his clothes be kept as clean as the masters kept theirs, though he lacked their facilities. He pulled his cloak from the body and brushed it vigorously.

“What are you going to do with me?” the dead woman said behind him.

“Eat,” he told her. “What did you think I was going to do?”

“I didn’t know.” And then: “I’ve read of you creatures, but I didn’t think you really existed.”

"We were the masters once," he said. He was not sure he still believed it, but it was what his mother had taught him. "This house was built in those days—that's why you won't wreck it: you're afraid." He had finished with the cloak; he hung it up and turned to face her, sitting on the bed. "You're afraid of waking the old times," he said. She lay slumped in the corner, and though her mouth moved, her eyes were only half open, looking at nothing.

"We tore a lot of them down," she said.

"If you're going to talk, you might as well sit up straight." He lifted her by the shoulders and propped her in the corner. A nail protruded from the wall there; he twisted a lock of her hair on it so her head would not loll; her hair was the rose shade of a little girl's dress, and soft but slightly sticky.

"I'm dead, you know."

"No, you're not." They always said this (except, sometimes, for the children) and his mother had always denied it. He felt that he was keeping up a family tradition.

"Dead," the pearl-eyed woman said. "Never, never, never. Another year, and everything would have been all right. I want to cry, but I can't breathe to."

"Your kind lives a long time with a broken neck," he told her. "But you'll die eventually."

"I am dead now."

He was not listening. There were other humans in the city; he had always known that, but only now, with the sight of the old man and the girl, had their existence seemed real to him.

"I thought you were all gone," the pearl-eyed dead woman said thinly. "All gone long ago, like a bad dream."

Happy with his new discovery, he said, "Why do you set traps for us, then? Maybe there are more of us than you think."

"There can't be many of you. How many people do you kill in a year?" Her mind was lifting the sheet from his bed, hoping to smother him with it; but he had seen that trick many times.

"Twenty or thirty." (He was boasting.)

“So many.”

“When you don’t get much besides meat, you need a lot of it. And then I only eat the best parts—why not? I kill twice a month or more except when it’s cold, and I could kill enough for two or three if I had to.” (*The girl had had a knife*. Knives were bad, except for cutting up afterward. But knives left blood behind. He would kill for her—she could stay here and take care of his clothes, prepare their food. He thought of himself walking home under a new moon, and seeing her face in the window of the turret.) To the dead woman he said, “You saw that girl? With the black hair? She and the old man killed your husband, and I’m going to bring her here to live.” He stood and began to walk up and down the small room, soothing himself with the sound of his own footsteps.

“He wasn’t my husband.” The sheet dropped limply now that he was no longer on the bed. “Why didn’t you change? When the rest changed their genes?”

“I wasn’t alive then.”

“You must have received some tradition.”

“We didn’t want to. We are the human beings.”

“Everyone wanted to. Your old breed had worn out the planet; even with much better technology we’re still starved for energy and raw materials because of what you did.”

“There hadn’t been enough to eat before,” he said, “but when so many changed there was a lot. So why should more change?”

It was a long time before she answered, and he knew the body was stiffening. That was bad, because as long as she lived in it the flesh would stay sweet; when the life was gone, he would have to cut it up quickly before the stuff in her lower intestine tainted the rest.

“Strange evolution,” she said at last. “Man become food for men.”

“I don’t understand the second word. Talk so I know what you’re saying.” He kicked her in the chest to emphasize his point, and knocked her over; he heard a rib snap. . . . She did

not reply, and he lay down on the bed. His mother had told him there was a meeting place in the city where men gathered on certain special nights—but he had forgotten (if he had ever known) what those nights were.

“That isn’t even metalanguage,” the dead woman said, “only children’s talk.”

“Shut up.”

After a moment he said, “I’m going out. If you can make your body stand, and get out of here, and get down to the ground floor, and find the way out, then you may be able to tell someone about me and have the police waiting when I come back.” He went out and closed the door, then stood patiently outside for five minutes.

When he opened it again, the corpse stood erect with her hands on his table, her tremors upsetting the painted metal circus figures he had had since he was a child—the girl acrobat, the clown with his hoop and trained pig. One of her legs would not straighten. “Listen,” he said. “You’re not going to do it. I told you all that because I knew you’d think of it yourself. They always do, and they never make it. The farthest I’ve ever had anyone get was out the door and to the top of the steps. She fell down them, and I found her at the bottom when I came back. You’re dead. Go to sleep.”

The blind eyes had turned toward him when he began to speak, but they no longer watched him now. The face, which had been beautiful, was now entirely the face of a corpse. The cramped leg crept toward the floor as he watched, halted, began to creep downward again. Sighing, he lifted the dead woman off her feet, replaced her in the corner, and went down the creaking stairs to find the black-haired girl.

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“There has been quite a few to come after her,” her father said, “since we come into town. Quite a few.” He sat in the back of the bus, on the rearmost seat that went completely across the back

like a sofa. "But you're the first ever to find us here. The others, they hear about her, and leave a sign at the meetin'."

Paul wanted to ask where it was such signs were left, but held his peace.

"You know there ain't many folks at *all* anymore," her father went on. "And not many of *them* is women. And *damn few* is young girls like my Janie. I had a fella here that wanted her two weeks back—he said he hadn't had no real woman in two years; well, I didn't like the way he said *real*, so I said what did he do, and he said he fooled around with what he killed, sometimes, before they got cold. You never did like that, did you?"

Paul said he had not.

"How'd you find this dump here?"

"Just look around." He had searched the area in ever-widening circles, starting at the alley in which he had seen the girl and her father. They had one of the masters' cold boxes to keep their ripe kills in (as he did himself), but there was the stink of clotted blood about the dump nonetheless. It was behind a high fence, closer to the park than he would have thought possible.

"When we come, there was a fella living here. Nice fella, a German. Name was Curtain—something like that. He went sweet on my Janie right off. Well, I wasn't too taken with having a foreigner in the family, but he took us in and let us settle in the big station wagon. Told me he wanted to wed Janie, but I said no, she's too young. Wait a year, I says, and take her with my blessing. She wasn't but fourteen then. Well, one night the German fella went out and I guess they got him, because he never come back. We moved into this here bus then for the extra room."

His daughter was sitting at his feet, and he reached a crooked-fingered hand down and buried it in her midnight hair. She looked up at him and smiled. "Got a pretty face, ain't she?" he said.

Paul nodded.

"She's a mite thin, you was going to say. Well, that's true. I do my best to provide, but I'm feared, and not shamed to admit to it."

"The ghost-houses," Paul said.

"What's that?"

"That's what I've always called them. I don't get to talk to many other people."

"Where the doors shut on you—lock you in."

"Yes."

"That ain't ghosts—now don't you think I'm one of them fools don't believe in them. I know better. But that ain't ghosts. They're always looking, don't you see, for people they think ain't right. That's us. It's electricity does it. You ever been caught like that?"

Paul nodded. He was watching the delicate swelling Janie's breasts made in the fabric of her filthy shirt, and only half listening to her father; but the memory penetrated the young desire that half-embarrassed him, bringing back fear. The windows of the bus had been set to black, and the light inside was dim—still it was possible some glimmer showed outside. *There should be no lights in the dump.* He listened, but heard only katydids singing in the rubbish.

"They thought I was a master—I dress like one," he said. "That's something you should do. They were going to test me. I turned the machine over and broke it, and jumped through a window." He had been on the sixth floor, and had been saved by landing in the branches of a tree whose bruised twigs and torn leaves exuded an acrid incense that to him was the very breath of panic still; but it had not been the masters, or the instrument-filled examination room, or the jump from the window that had terrified him, but waiting in the ghost-room while the walls talked to one another in words he could sometimes, for a few seconds, nearly understand.

"It wouldn't work for me—got too many things wrong with me. Lines in my face; even got a wart—they never do."

“Janie could.”

The old man cleared his throat; it was a thick sound, like water in a downspout in a hard rain. “I been meaning to talk to you about her, about why those other fellas I told you about never took her—not that I’d of let some of them: Janie’s the only family I got left. But I ain’t so particular I don’t want to see her married at all—not a bit of it. Why, we wouldn’t of come here if it weren’t for Janie. When her monthly come, I said to myself, she’ll be wantin’ a man, and what’re you goin’ to do way out here? Though the country was gettin’ bad anyway, I must say. If they’d of had real dogs, I believe they would have got us several times.”

He paused, perhaps thinking of those times, the lights in the woods at night and the running, perhaps only trying to order his thoughts. Paul waited, scratching an ankle, and after a few seconds the old man said, “We didn’t want to do this, you know, us Pendeltons. That’s mine and Janie’s name—Pendelton. Janie’s Augusta Jane, and I’m Emmitt J.”

“Paul Gorou,” Paul said.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Gorou. When the time come, they took one whole side of the family. They were the Worthmore Pendeltons; that’s what we always called them, because most of them lived thereabouts. Cousins of mine they was, and second cousins. We was the Evershaw Pendeltons, and they didn’t take none of us. Bad blood, they said—too much wrong to be worth fixing, or too much that mightn’t get fixed right, and then show up again. My ma—she’s alive then—she always swore it was her sister Lillian’s boy that did it to us. The whole side of his head was pushed in. You know what I mean? They used to say a cow’d kicked him when he was small, but it wasn’t so—he’s just born like that. He could talk some—there’s those that set a high value on that—but the slobber’d run out of his mouth. My ma said if it wasn’t for him we’d have got in sure. The only other thing was my sister Clara that was born with a bad eye—blind, you know, and something wrong with the lid

of it too. But she was just as sensible as anybody. Smart as a whip. So I would say it's likely Ma was right. Same thing with your family, I suppose?"

"I think so. I don't really know."

"A lot of it was die-beetees. They could fix it, but if there was other things too they just kept them out. Of course when it was over there wasn't no medicine for them no more, and they died off pretty quick. When I was young, I used to think that was what it meant: die-beetees—you died away. It's really sweetening of the blood. You heard of it?"

Paul nodded.

"I'd like to taste some sometime, but I never come to think of that while there was still some of them around."

"If they weren't masters—"

"Didn't mean I'd of killed them," the old man said quickly. "Just got one to gash his arm a trifle so I could taste of it. Back then—that would be twenty aught nine; close to fifty years gone it is now—there was several I knowed that was just my age. . . . What I was meaning to say at the beginning was that us Pendeltons never figured on anythin' like this. We'd farmed, and we meant to keep on, grow our own truck and breed our own stock. Well, that did for a time, but it wouldn't keep."

Paul, who had never considered living off the land, or even realized that it was possible to do so, could only stare at him.

"You take chickens, now. Everybody always said there wasn't nothing easier than chickens, but that was when there was medicine you could put in the water to keep off the sickness. Well, the time come when you couldn't get it no more than you could get a can of beans in those stores of theirs that don't use money or cards or anything a man can understand. My dad had two hundred in the flock when the sickness struck, and it took every hen inside of four days. You wasn't supposed to eat them that had died sick, but we did it. Plucked 'em and canned 'em—by that time our old locker that plugged in the wall wouldn't work. When the chickens was all canned, Dad saddled a horse

we had then and rode twenty-five miles to a place where the new folks grew chickens to eat themselves. I guess you know what happened to him, though—they wouldn't sell, and they wouldn't trade. Finally he begged them. He was a Pendelton, and used to cry when he told of it. He said the harder he begged them the scarer they got. Well, finally he reached out and grabbed one by the leg—he was on his knees to them—and he hit him alongside the face with a book he was carryin'."

The old man rocked backward and forward in his seat as he spoke, his eyes half closed. "There wasn't no more seed but what was saved from last year then, and the corn went so bad the ears wasn't no longer than a soft dick. No bullets for Dad's old gun, nowhere to buy new traps when what we had was lost. Then one day just afore Christmas these here machines just started tearing up our fields. They had forgot about us, you see. We threw rocks but it didn't do no good, and about midnight one come right through the house. There wasn't no one living then but Ma and Dad and brother Tom and me and Janie. Janie wasn't but just a little bit of a thing. The machine got Tom in the leg with apiece of two-by-four—rammed the splintery end into him, you see. The rot got to the wound and he died a week after; it was winter then, and we was living in a place me and Dad built up on the hill out of branches and saplings."

"About Janie," Paul said. "I can understand how you might not want to let her go—"

"Are you sayin' you don't want her?" The old man shifted in his seat, and Paul saw that his right hand had moved close to the crevice where the horizontal surface joined the vertical. The crevice was a trifle too wide, and he thought he knew what was hidden there. He was not afraid of the old man, and it had crossed his mind more than once that if he killed him there would be nothing to prevent his taking Janie.

"I want her," he said. "I'm not going away without her." He stood up without knowing why.

"There's been others said the same thing. I would go, you know, to the meetin' in the regular way; come back next month, and the fella'd be waitin'."

The old man was drawing himself to his feet, his jaw outthrust belligerently. "They'd see her," he said, "and they'd talk a lot, just like you, about how good they'd take care of her, though there wasn't a one brought a lick to eat when he come to call. Me and Janie, sometimes we ain't et for three, four days—they never take account of that. Now here, you look at her."

Bending swiftly, he took his daughter by the arm; she rose gracefully, and he spun her around. "Her ma was a pretty woman," he said, "but not as pretty as what she is, even if she is so thin. And she's got sense too—I don't keer what they say."

Janie looked at Paul with frightened, animal eyes. He gestured, he hoped gently, for her to come to him, but she only pressed herself against her father.

"You can talk to her. She understands."

Paul started to speak, then had to stop to clear his throat. At last he said, "Come here, Janie. You're going to live with me. We'll come back and see your father sometimes."

Her hand slipped into her shirt; came out holding a knife. She looked at the old man, who caught her wrist and took the knife from her and dropped it on the seat behind him, saying, "You're going to have to be a mite careful around her for a bit, but if you don't hurt her none she'll take to you pretty quick. She wants to take to you now—I can see it in the way she looks."

Paul nodded, accepting the girl from him almost as he might have accepted a package, holding her by her narrow waist.

"And when you get a mess of grub she likes to cut them up, sometimes, while they're still movin' around. Mostly I don't allow it, but if you do—anyway, once in a while—she'll like you better for it."

Paul nodded again. His hand, as if of its own volition, had strayed to the girl's smoothly rounded hip, and he felt such desire as he had never known before.

“Wait,” the old man said. His breath was foul in the close air. “You listen to me now. You’re just a young fella and I know how you feel, but you don’t know how I do. I want you to understand before you go. I love my girl. You take good care of her or I’ll see to you. And if you change your mind about wanting her, don’t you just turn her out. I’ll take her back, you hear?”

Paul said, “All right.”

“Even a bad man can love his child. You remember that, because it’s true.”

Her husband took Janie by the hand and led her out of the wrecked bus. She was looking over her shoulder, and he knew that she expected her father to drive a knife into his back.

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They had seen the boy—a brown-haired, slightly freckled boy of nine or ten with an armload of books—on a corner where a small, columniated building concealed the entrance to the monorail, and the streets were wide and empty. The children of the masters were seldom out so late. Paul waved to him, not daring to speak, but attempting to convey by his posture that he wanted to ask directions; he wore the black cloak and scarlet-slashed shirt, the gold sandals and wide-legged black film trousers proper to an evening of pleasure. On his arm Janie was all in red, her face covered by a veil dotted with tiny synthetic bloodstones. Gem-studded veils were a fashion now nearly extinct among the women of the masters, but one that served to conceal the blankness of eye that betrayed Janie, as Paul had discovered, almost instantly. She gave a soft moan of hunger as she saw the boy, and clasped Paul’s arm more tightly. Paul waved again.

The boy halted as though waiting for them, but when they were within five meters he turned and dashed away. Janie was after him before Paul could stop her. The boy dodged between two buildings and raced through to the next street; Paul was just in time to see Janie follow him into a doorway in the center of the block.

He found her clear-soled platform shoes in the vestibule, under a four-dimensional picture of Hugo de Vries. De Vries was in the closing years of his life, and in the few seconds it took Paul to pick up the shoes and conceal them behind an aquarium of phosphorescent cephalopods, had died, rotted to dust, and undergone rebirth as a fissioning cell in his mother's womb with all the labyrinth of genetics still before him.

The lower floors, Paul knew, were apartments. He had entered them sometimes when he could find no prey on the streets. There would be a school at the top.

A confused, frightened-looking woman stood in an otherwise empty corridor, a disheveled library book lying open at her feet. As Paul pushed past her, he could imagine Janie knocking her out of the way, and the woman's horror at the savage, exultant face glimpsed beneath her veil.

There were elevators, a liftshaft, and a downshaft, all clustered in an alcove. *The boy would not have waited for an elevator with Janie close behind him. . . .*

The liftshaft floated Paul as spring water floats a cork. Thickened by conditioning agents, the air remained a gas; enriched with added oxygen, it stimulated his whole being, though it was as viscous as corn syrup when he drew it into his lungs. Far above, suspended (as it seemed) in crystal and surrounded by the books the boy had thrown down at her, he saw Janie with her red gown billowing around her and her white legs flashing. She was going to the top, apparently to the uppermost floor, and he reasoned that the boy, having led her there, would jump into the downshaft to escape her. He got off at the eighty-fifth floor, opened the hatch to the downshaft, and was rewarded by seeing the boy only a hundred meters above him. It was a simple matter then to wait on the landing and pluck him out of the sighing column of thickened air.

The boy's pointed, narrow face, white with fear under a tan, turned up toward him. "Don't," the boy said. "Please, sir, good

master—" but Paul clamped him under his left arm, and with a quick wrench of his right broke his neck.

Janie was swimming head down with the downshaft current, her mouth open and full of eagerness, and her black hair like a cloud about her head. She had lost her veil. Paul showed her the boy and stepped into the shaft with her. The hatch slammed behind him, and the motion of the air ceased.

He looked at Janie. She had stopped swimming and was staring hungrily into the dead boy's face. He said, "Something's wrong," and she seemed to understand, though it was possible that she only caught the fear in his voice. The hatch would not open, and slowly the current in the shaft was reversing, lifting them; he tried to swim against it but the effort was hopeless. When they were at the top, the dead boy began to talk; Janie put her hand over his mouth to muffle the sound. The hatch at the landing opened, and they stepped out onto the hundred-and-first floor. A voice from a loudspeaker in the wall said, "*I am sorry to detain you, but there is reason to think you have undergone a recent deviation from the optional development pattern. In a few minutes I will arrive in person to provide counseling; while you are waiting it may be useful for us to review what is meant by 'optimal development.' Look at the projection.*

"In infancy the child first feels affection for its mother, the provider of warmth and food. . . ." There was a door at the other end of the room, and Paul swung a heavy chair against it, making a din that almost drowned out the droning speaker.

"Later one's peer-group becomes, for a time, all-important—or nearly so. The boys and girls you see are attending a model school in Armstrong. Notice that no tint is used to mask the black of space above their airtent."

The lock burst from the door frame, but a remotely actuated hydraulic cylinder snapped it shut each time a blow from the chair drove it open. Paul slammed his shoulder against it, and before it could close again put his knee where the shattered bolt socket

had been. A chrome-plated steel rod as thick as a finger had dropped from the chair when his blows had smashed the wood and plastic holding it; after a moment of incomprehension, Janie dropped the dead boy, wedged the rod between the door and the jamb, and slipped through. He was following her when the rod lifted, and the door swung shut on his foot.

He screamed and screamed again, and then, in the echoing silence that followed, heard the loudspeaker mumbling about education, and Janie's sobbing, indrawn breath. Through the crack between the door and the frame, the two-centimeter space held in existence by what remained of his right foot, he could see the livid face and blind, malevolent eyes of the dead boy, whose will still held the steel rod suspended in air. "Die," Paul shouted at him. "Die! You're dead!" The rod came crashing down.

"This young woman," the loudspeaker said, "has chosen the profession of medicine. She will be a physician, and she says now that she was born for that. She will spend the remainder of her life in relieving the agonies of disease."

Several minutes passed before he could make Janie understand what it was she had to do.

"After her five years' training in basic medical techniques, she will specialize in surgery for another three years before—"

It took Janie a long time to bite through his Achilles tendon; when it was over, she began to tear at the ligaments that held the bones of the tarsus to the leg. Over the pain he could feel the hot tears washing the blood from his foot.



TRADING HEARTS AT THE HALF KAFFE CAFÉ

Charles de Lint

Canadian author and folk musician **Charles de Lint** is widely recognized as a pioneer of urban fantasy, with fiction that combines elegant storytelling, a fascination with folktales and legends, and believable, fully developed characters. Since his debut in 1979 with the novelette “The Fane of the Grey Rose,” de Lint has published more than sixty books, including the novels *Moonheart*, *The Little Country*, *The Onion Girl*, and, most recently, *The Mystery of Grace*. His collection *Moonlight and Vines* received a World Fantasy Award in 2000, only one of many awards and prizes his works have earned over the years. De Lint lives in Ottawa, Ontario, with his wife, artist MaryAnn Harris.

“Trading Hearts at the Half Kaffe Café” is set in the mythical North American city of Newford, which has grown steadily richer and more complex since it was first revealed in 1989’s “Timeskip.” De Lint regularly revisits many of Newford’s residents; Mona, the cartoonist you’re about to meet in “Trading Hearts,” is also featured in the tales “My Life as a Bird” and “Refinerytown.” Here, she and the shapeshifter Lyle share the story of their first date, in a piece that foregrounds de Lint’s flair for strong character voices.



CHERISH EACH DAY

Single male, professional, 30ish,
wants more out of life. Likes the
outdoors, animals. Seeking single
female with similar attributes and
aspirations. Ad# 6592

THE PROBLEM IS EXPECTATIONS.

We all buy so heavily into how we hope things will turn out, how society and our friends say it should be, that by the time we actually have a date, we're locked into those particular hopes and expectations and miss everything that could be. We end up stumbling our way through the forest, never seeing all the unexpected and wonderful possibilities and potentials because we're looking for the idea of a tree, instead of appreciating the actual trees in front of us.

At least that's the way it seems to me.

.

Mona

"You already tried that dress on," Sue told me.

"With these shoes?"

Sue nodded. "As well as the red boots."

"And?"

"It's not a first date dress," Sue said. "Unless you wear it with the green boots and that black jacket with the braided cuffs. And you don't take the jacket off."

"Too much cleavage?"

"It's not a matter of cleavage, so much as the cleavage combined with those little spaghetti straps. You're just so *there*. And it's pretty short."

I checked my reflection. She was right, of course. I looked a bit like a tart, and not in a good way. At least Sue had managed to tame my usually unruly hair so that it looked as though it had an actual style instead of the head topped with blonde spikes I normally saw looking back at me from the mirror.

"But the boots would definitely punk it up a little," Sue said. "You know, so it's not quite so 'come hither.'"

"This is hopeless," I said. "How late is it?"

Sue smiled. "Twenty minutes to showtime."

"Oh god. And I haven't even started on my make-up."

"With that dress and those heels, he won't be looking at your make-up."

"Wonderful."

I don't know how I'd gotten talked into this in the first place. Two years without a steady boyfriend, I guess, though by that criteria it should *still* have been Sue agonizing over what to wear and me lending the moral support. She's been much longer without a steady. Mind you, after Pete moved out, the longest relationship I'd been in was with this grotty little troll of a dwarf, and you had to lose points for that. Not that Nacky Wilde had been boyfriend material, but he *had* moved in on me for a few weeks.

"I think you should wear your lucky dress," Sue said.

"I met Pete in that dress."

"True. But only the ending was bad. You had a lot of good times together, too."

"I suppose . . ."

Sue grinned at me. "Eighteen minutes and counting."

"Will you stop with the Cape Canaveral bit already?"

.

Lyle

"Just don't do the teeth thing and you'll be all right," Tyrone said.

"Teeth thing? What teeth thing?"

"You know, how when you get nervous, your teeth start to protrude like your muzzle's pushing out and you're about to shift your skin. It's not so pretty."

"Thanks for adding to the tension," I told him. "Now I've got that to worry about as well."

I stepped closer to the mirror and ran a finger across my teeth. Were they already pushing out?

"I don't even know why you're going through all of this," Tyrone said.

"I want to meet someone normal."

"You mean not like us."

"I mean someone who isn't as jaded as we are. Someone with a conventional lifespan for whom each day is important. And I know I'm not going to meet her when the clans gather, or in some bar."

Tyrone shook his head. "I still think it's like dating barnyard animals. Or getting a pet."

"Whatever made you so bitter?"

But Tyrone only grinned. "Just remember what mama said. Don't eat a girl on the first date."

.

Mona

"Now don't forget," Sue said. "Build yourself up a little."

"You mean lie."

"Of course not. Well, not a lot. And it might help if you don't seem quite so bohemian right off the bat."

"Pete liked it."

Sue nodded. "And see where that got you. The bohemian artist type has this mysterious allure, especially to straight guys, but it wears off. So you have to show you have the corporate chops as well."

I had to laugh.

"I'm being serious here," Sue said.

“So who am I supposed to be?” I asked.

Sue started to tick the items off on her fingers. “Okay. To start with, you can’t go wrong just getting him to talk about himself. You know, act sort of shy and listen a lot.”

“I *am* shy.”

“When it does come to what you do, don’t bring up the fact that you write and draw a comic book for a living. Make it more like art’s a hobby. Focus on the fact that you’re involved in the publishing field—editing, proofing, book design. Everybody says they like bold and mysterious women, but the truth is, most of them like them from a distance. They like to dream about them. Actually having them sitting at a table with them is way too scary.”

Sue had been reading a book on dating called *The Rules* recently, and she was full of all sorts of advice on how to make a relationship work. Maybe that was how they did it in the fifties, but it all seemed so demeaning to me entering the twenty-first century. I thought we’d come farther than that.

“In other words, lie,” I repeated and turned back to the mirror to finish applying my mascara.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d worn any. On some other date gone awry, I supposed, then I mentally corrected myself. I should be more positive.

“Think of it as bending the truth,” Sue said. “It’s not like you’re going to be pretending forever. It’s just a little bit of manipulation for that all-important first impression. Once he realizes he likes you, he won’t mind when it turns out you’re this little boho comic book gal.”

“Your uptown roots are showing,” I told her.

“You know what I mean.”

Unfortunately, I did. Everybody wanted to seem normal and to meet somebody normal, so first dates became these rather strained, staged affairs with both of you hoping that none of your little hang-ups and oddities were hanging out like an errant shirt-tail or a drooping slip.

“Ready?” Sue asked.

“No.”

“Well, it’s time to go anyway.”

.

Lyle

“So what are you going to tell her you do for a living?” Tyrone asked as we walked to the café. “The old hunter/gatherer line?”

“Which worked real well in Cro-Magnon times.”

“Hey, some things never change.”

“Like you.”

Tyrone shrugged. “What can I say? If it works, don’t fix it.”

We stopped in front of The Half Kaffe. It was five minutes to.

“I’m of half a mind to sit in a corner,” Tyrone said. “Just to see how things work out.”

“You got the half a mind part right.”

Tyrone shook his head with mock sadness. “Sometimes I find it hard to believe we came from the same litter,” he said, then grinned.

When he reached over to straighten my tie, I gave him a little push to move him on his way.

“Give ’em hell,” he told me. “Girl doesn’t like you, she’s not worth knowing.”

“So now you’ve got a high opinion of me.”

“Hey, you may be feeble-minded, but you’re still my brother. That makes you prime.”

I had to return that smile of his. Tyrone was just so . . . Tyrone. Always the wolf.

He headed off down the block before I could give him another shove. I checked my teeth in the reflection of the window—still normal—then opened the door and went inside.

.

Mona

We were ten minutes late pulling up in front of The Half Kaffe.

"This is good," Sue said as I opened my door. "It doesn't make you look too eager."

"Another one of the 'Rules'?"

"Probably."

"Only probably?"

"Well, it's not like I've memorized them or done that well with them myself. You're the one with the date tonight."

I cut her some slack. If push came to shove, I knew she wouldn't take any grief from anyone, no matter what the rule book said.

I got out of the car. "Thanks for the ride, Sue."

"Remember," she said, holding up her phone. Folded up, it wasn't much bigger than a compact. "If things get uncomfortable or just plain weird, I'm only a cell phone call away."

"I'll remember."

I closed the door before she could give me more advice. I'd already decided I was just going to be myself—a dolled-up version of myself, mind you, but it actually felt kind of fun being all dressed up. I just wasn't going to pretend to be someone I wasn't.

Easy to promise to myself on the ride over, listening to Sue, but then my date had to be gorgeous, didn't he? I spotted him as soon as I opened the door, pausing in the threshold.

("I'll be holding a single rose," he'd told me.

("That is *so* romantic," Sue had said.)

Even with him sitting down, I knew he was tall. He had this shock of blue-black hair, brushed back from his forehead and skin the colour of espresso. He was wearing a suit that reminded me of the sky just as the dusk is fading and the single red rose lay on the table in front of him. He looked up when I came in—if it had been me, I'd have looked up every time the door opened, too—and I could have gone swimming in those dark, dark eyes of his.

I took a steadying breath. Walking over to his table, I held out my hand.

"You must be Lyle," I said. "I'm Mona."

.

Lyle

She was cute as a button.

("Here's my prediction," Tyrone had said. "She'll be three-hundred pounds on a five-foot frame. Or ugly as sin. Hell, maybe both.")

("I don't care how much she weighs or what she looks like," I told him. "Just so long as she's got a good heart.")

(Tyrone smiled. "You're so pathetic," he said.)

And naturally I made a mess of trying to stand up, shake her hand and give her the rose, all at the same time. My chair fell down behind me. The sound of it startled me and I almost pulled her off her feet, but we managed to get it all straightened without anybody getting hurt.

I wanted to check my teeth, and forced myself not to run my tongue over them.

We were here for the obligatory before-dinner drink, having mutually decided earlier on a café rather than a bar, with the unspoken assumption that if things didn't go well here, we could call the dinner off, no hard feelings. After asking what she wanted, I went and got us each a latte.

"Look," she said when I got back. "I know this isn't the way it's supposed to go, first date and everything, but I decided that I'm not going to pretend to be more or different than I am. So here goes.

"I write and draw a comic book for living. I usually have ink stains on my fingers and you're more likely to see me in overalls, or jeans and a T-shirt. I know I told you I like the outdoors like you said you did in your ad, but I've never spent a night outside of a city. I've never had a regular job either, I don't like being

anybody's pet boho girlfriend, and I'm way more shy than this is making me sound."

She was blushing as she spoke and looked a little breathless.

"Oh boy," she said. "That was really endearing, wasn't it?"

It actually was, but I didn't think she wanted to hear that. Searching for something to match her candor, I surprised myself as much as her.

"I'm sort of a werewolf myself," I told her.

"A werewolf," she repeated.

I nodded. "But only sort of. Not like in the movies with the full moon and hair sprouting all over my body. I'm just . . . they used to call us skinwalkers."

"Who did?"

I shrugged. "The first people to live here. Like the Kickaha, up on the rez. We're descended from what they call the animal people—the ones that were here when the world was made."

"Immortal wolves," she said.

I was surprised that she was taking this all so calmly. Surprised to be even talking about it in the first place, because it's never a good idea. Maybe Tyrone was right. We weren't supposed to mingle. But it was too late now and I felt I at least owed her a little more explanation.

"Not just wolves, but all kinds of animals," I said. "And we're not immortal. Only the first ones were and there aren't so many of them left anymore."

"And you can all take the shapes of animals."

I shook my head. "Usually it's only the ones who were born in their animal shape. The human genes are so strong that the change is easier. Those born human have some animal attributes, but most of them aren't skinwalkers."

"So if you bite me, I won't become a wolf."

"I don't know where those stories come from," I started, then sighed. "No, that's not true. I do know. These days most of us just like to fit in, live a bit in your world, a bit in the animal world. But it wasn't always like that. There have always been

those among us who considered everyone else in the world their private prey. Humans and animals.”

“Most of you?”

I sighed again. “There are still some that like to hunt.”

.

Mona

You’re probably wondering why I was listening to all of this without much surprise. But you see, that grotty little dwarf I told you about earlier—the one that moved in on me—did I mention he also had the habit of just disappearing, poof, like magic? One moment you’re talking to him, the next you’re standing in a seemingly empty room. The disembodied voice was the hardest to get used to. He’d sit around and tell me all kinds of stories like this. You experience something like that on a regular basis and you end up with more tolerance for weirdness.

Not that I actually believed Lyle here was a werewolf. But the fact that he was talking about it actually made him kind of interesting, though I could see it getting old after awhile.

“So,” I said. “What do you do when you’re not dating human girls and running around as a wolf?”

“Do?”

“You know, to make a living. Or were you born wealthy as well as immortal.”

“I’m not immortal.”

“So what do you do?”

“I’m . . . an investment counselor.”

“Hence the nice suit.”

He started to nod, then sighed. When he looked down at his latte, I studied his jaw. It seemed to protrude a little more than I remembered, though I knew that was just my own imagination feeding on all his talk about clans of animals that walk around looking like people.

He lifted his head. “How come you’re so calm about all of this?”

I shrugged. "I don't know. I like the way it all fits together, I suppose. You've obviously really thought it all through."

"Or I'm good at remembering the history of the clans."

"That, too. But the question that comes to my mind is, why tell me all of this?"

"I'm still asking myself that," he said. "I guess it came from your saying we should be honest with each other. It feels good to be able to talk about it to someone outside the clans."

He paused, those dark eyes studying me more closely. Oh why couldn't he have just been a normal guy? Why did he have to be either a loony, or some weird faerie creature?

"You don't believe me," he said.

"Well . . ."

"I didn't ask for proof when you were telling me about your comic books."

I couldn't believe this.

"It's hardly the same thing. Besides—"

I got up and fetched one of the freebie copies of *In the City* from their display bin by the door. Flipping almost to the back of the tabloid-sized newspaper, I laid open the page with my weekly strip "Spunky Grrl" on the table in front of him. This was the one where my heroine, the great and brave Spunky Grrl, was answering a personal ad. Write from your life, they always say. I guess that meant that next week's strip would have Spunky sitting in a café with a wolf dressed up as a man.

"It's not so hard to prove," I said, pointing at the by-line.

"Just because you have the same name—"

"Oh, please." I called over to the bar where the owner was reading one of those glossy British music magazines he likes so much. "Who am I, Jonathan?"

He looked up and gave the pair of us a once-over with that perpetually cool and slightly amused look he'd perfected once the café had become a success and he was no longer run ragged trying to keep up with everything.

“Mona Morgan,” he said. “Who still owes me that page of original art from ‘My Life as a Bird’ that featured The Half Kaffe.”

“It’s coming,” I said and turned back to my date. “There. You see? Now it’s your turn. Make your hand change into a paw or something.”

.

Lyle

She was irrepressible and refreshing, but she was also driving me a little crazy and I could feel my teeth pressing up against my lips.

“Maybe some other time,” I said.

She smiled. “Right. Never turn into a wolf on the first date.”

“Something like that,” I replied, remembering Tyrone’s advice earlier in the evening. I wondered what she’d make of that, but decided not to find out. Instead I looked down at her comic strip.

It was one of those underground ones, not clean like a regular newspaper strip but with lots of scratchy lines and odd perspectives. There wasn’t a joke either, just this wild-looking girl answering a personal ad. I looked up at my date.

“So I’m research?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Everything that happens to me ends up in one strip or another.”

I pointed at the character in the strip. “And is this you?”

“Kind of an alter ego.”

I could see myself appearing in an upcoming installment, turning into a wolf in the middle of the date. The idea bothered me. I mean, think about it. If you were a skinwalker, would you want the whole world to know it?

I lifted my gaze from the strip. This smart-looking woman bore no resemblance to her scruffy pen and ink alter ego.

“So who cleaned you up?” I asked.

I know the idea of showing up in her strip was troubling me, but that was still no excuse for what I'd just said. I regretted the words as soon as they spilled out of my mouth.

The hurt in her eyes was quickly replaced with anger. "A *human* being," she said and stood up.

I started to stand as well. "Look, I'm sorry—" I began but I was already talking to her back.

"You owe me for the lattes!" the barman called as I went to follow her.

I paid him and hurried outside, but she was already gone. Slowly I went back inside and stood at our table. I looked at the rose and the open paper. After a moment, I folded up the paper and went back outside. I left the rose there on the table.

I could've tracked her—the scent was still strong—but I went home instead to the apartment Tyrone and I were sharing. He wasn't back yet from wherever he'd gone tonight, which was just as well. I wasn't looking forward to telling him about how the evening had gone. Changing from my suit to jeans and a jersey, I sat down on the sofa and opened my copy of *In the City* to Mona's strip. I was still staring at the scruffy little blonde cartoon girl when the phone rang.

.

Mona

As soon as I got outside, I made a quick bee-line down the alley that runs alongside the café, my boots clomping on the pavement. I didn't slow down until I got to the next street and had turned onto it. I didn't bother looking for a phone booth. I knew Sue would pick me up, but I needed some down time first and it wasn't that long a walk back home. Misery's supposed to love company, but the way I was feeling it was still too immediate to share. For now, I needed to be alone.

I suppose I kind of deserved what he'd said—I had been acting all punky and pushing at him. But after awhile the

animal people business had started to wear thin, feeling more like an excuse not to have a real conversation with me rather than fun. And then he'd been just plain mean.

Sue was going to love my report on tonight's fiasco. Not.

I'm normally pretty good about walking about on my own at night—not fearless like my friend Jilly, but I'm usually only going from my local subway stop or walking down well-frequented streets. Tonight, though . . .

The streets in this neighbourhood were quiet, and it was still relatively early, barely nine, but I couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that someone was following me. You know that prickle you can get at the nape of your neck—some left-over survival instinct from when we'd just climbed down from the trees, I guess. A monkey buzz.

I kept looking back the way I'd come—expecting to see Mr. Wolf Man skulking about a block or so behind me—but there was never anybody there. It wasn't until I was on my own block and almost home that I saw the dog. Some kind of big husky, it seemed, from the glance I got before it slipped behind a parked car. Except its tail didn't go up in that trademark curl.

I kept walking towards my door, backwards, so that I could look down the street. The dog stuck its head out twice, ducking back when it saw me watching. The second time I bolted for my apartment, charged up the steps and onto the porch. I had my keys out, but I was so rattled, it took me a few moments to get the proper one in the lock. It didn't help that I spent more time staring down the street than at what I was doing. But I finally got the key in, unlocked the door, and was inside, closing and locking the door quickly behind me.

I leaned against the wall to catch my breath, positioned so that my gaze could go down the street. I didn't see the dog. But I did see a man, standing there in the general area of where the dog had been. He was looking down the street in my direction and I ducked back from the window. It was too far away to make out his features, but I could guess who he was.

This was what I'd been afraid of when I'd first seen the dog: That it wasn't a dog. That it was a wolf. That Mr. Wolf Man really *could* become a wolf and now he'd turned into Stalker Freak Man.

I was thinking in capitals like my superhero character Rocket Grrl always did when she was confronting evil-doers like Can't Commit Man. Except I wasn't likely to go out and fight the good fight like she always was. I was more the hide-under-the-bed kind of person.

But I was kind of mad now.

I watched until the man turned away, then hurried up the stairs to my apartment. Once I was inside, I made sure the deadbolt was engaged. Ditto the lock on the window that led out onto the fire escape. I peered down at the street from behind the safety of the curtains in my living room, but saw no one out there.

I changed and paced around the apartment for a while before I finally went into the kitchen and punched in Mr. Wolf Man's phone number. I lit into him the minute he answered.

"Maybe you think it's a big joke, following me home like that, but I didn't appreciate it."

"But I—" he started.

"And maybe you can turn into a wolf or a dog or whatever, or maybe you just have one trained to follow people, but I think it's horrible either way, and I just want you to know that we have an anti-stalking law in this city, and if I ever see you hanging around again, I'm going to phone the police."

Then I hung up.

I was hoping I'd feel better, but I just felt horrible instead. The thing is, I'd found myself sort of liking him before he got all rude and then did the stalking bit.

I guess I should have called Sue at this point, but it was still too freshly depressing to talk about. Instead I made myself some toast and tea, then went and sat in the living room, peeking

through the curtains every couple of minutes to make sure there was no one out there. It was a miserable way to spend an evening that had held the potential of being so much more.

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Lyle

I hung up the phone feeling totally confused. What had she been talking about? But by the time Tyrone got home, I thought I had a clue.

“Did you follow her home?” I asked.

He just looked confused. “Follow who home?”

“My date.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because we got into a fight and you’re always stepping in to protect me or set people straight when you think they’ve treated me badly.”

I could see that look come into his eyes—confirming my feelings, I thought, until he spoke.

“Your date went bad?” he asked.

“It went horribly—but you already know that.”

Tyrone sighed. “I was nowhere near the café, or wherever you guys went after.”

“We didn’t have time to go anywhere after,” I said, and then I told him about how the evening had gone.

“Let’s see if I’ve got this straight,” Tyrone said. “She tells you she likes to dress casually and draws comics for a living, so you tell her you’re a skinwalker.”

“We were sharing intimacies.”

“Sounds more like lunacies on your part. What were you thinking?”

I sighed. “I don’t know. I liked her. I liked the fact that she didn’t want to start off with any B.S.”

Tyrone shook his head. “Well, it’s done now, I guess. With any luck she’ll just think you’re a little weird and leave it at

that.” He paused and fixed with me with a considering look. “Tell me you didn’t shift in front of her.”

“No. But from this phone call . . .”

“Right. The phone call. I forgot. You don’t think you put that idea into her head?”

“She sounded a little scared as well as pissed off. But if it wasn’t you and it wasn’t me, I guess her imagination must have been working overtime.”

Tyrone shrugged. “Maybe. Except . . . did you touch her at all?”

“Not really. We just shook hands and I grabbed her shoulders when I stumbled and lost my balance.”

“So your scent was on her.”

I nodded. “I suppose.”

I saw where he was going. We don’t actually go out marking territory anymore—at least most of us don’t. But if another wolf had caught my scent on her it might intrigue him enough to follow her. And if he was one of the old school, he might think it fun to do a little more than that.

“I’ve got to go to her place and check it out,” I said.

“And you’ll find it how?” Tyrone asked.

He was right. I didn’t even know her phone number.

“That we can deal with,” Tyrone said.

I’d forgotten what we can do with phones these days. Tyrone had gotten all the bells and whistles for ours and in moments he’d called up the digits of the last incoming call on the liquid display.

“It still doesn’t tell us where she lives,” I said. “And I doubt she’d appreciate a call from me right now. If ever.”

“I can handle that as well,” Tyrone told me and he went over to the computer.

I hadn’t lied to Mona. I did deal with investments—on-line. I was on the computer for a few hours every day, but I wasn’t the hacker Tyrone was. I watched as he hacked into the telephone company’s billing database. Within minutes, he had an address

match for the phone number. He wrote it down on a scrap of paper and stood up.

"This is my mess," I told him. "So I'll clean it up."

"You're sure?"

When I nodded, he handed me the address.

"Don't kill anybody unless you have to," he said. "But if you do, do it clean."

I wasn't sure if he meant Mona or her stalker and I didn't want to ask.

.

Mona

After I finished my toast and tea, I decided to go to bed. I wasn't really tired, but maybe I'd get lucky and fall asleep and when I woke up, it would be a whole new day. And it would sure beat sitting around feeling miserable tonight.

I washed up my dishes, then took one last look out the window. And froze. There wasn't one dog out there, but a half dozen, lounging on the sidewalk across the street like they hadn't a care in the world. And they weren't dogs. I've seen enough nature specials on PBS to know a wolf when I see one.

As I started to let the curtain drop, all their heads lifted and turned in my direction. One got to its feet and began to trot across the street, pausing halfway to look down the block. Its companions turned their gazes in that direction as well and I followed suit.

He was dressed more casually now—jeans and a windbreaker—but I had no trouble recognizing him. My date. Mr. Stalker Man. Oh, where was Rocket Grrl when you needed her?

I knew what I should be doing. Finding something to use as a weapon in case they got in. Dialing 9-1-1 for sure. Instead, all I could do was slide down to my knees by the window and stare down at the street.

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Lyle

It was worse than I'd thought. A pack of cousins had gathered outside the address I had for Mona. From the smell in the air, I knew they were out for fun. The trouble is, skinwalker fun invariably results in somebody getting hurt. We're the reason true wolves get such a bad rap. Whenever we're around, trouble follows.

The alpha-male rose up into a man shape at my approach. His pack formed a half-circle at his back, a couple more of them taking human shape. I could tell from the dark humour in their eyes that I'd just raised the ante on their night of fun. I realized I shouldn't have turned down Tyrone's offer to help, but it was too late now. I had to brave it out on my own.

"Thanks for the show of force," I said with way more confidence than I was feeling, "but I don't really need any help to see my girlfriend."

"She's not your girlfriend," the alpha-male said.

"Sure, she is."

"Bullshit. That little chickadee's so scared you can smell her fear a block away."

"Well, you're not exactly helping matters," I told him.

He gave me a toothy grin, dark humour flicking in his eyes.

"I was walking by the café when she dumped you," he said.

I shrugged. "We had a little tiff, no big deal. That's why I'm here now—to make it up with her."

He shook his head. "She's as scared of you as she is of us. But tell you what, back off and you can have whatever's left over."

Some of us fit in as we can, some of us live a footloose life. Then there are the ones like these that went feral in the long ago and just stayed that way. Some are lone wolves, the others run in packs. Mostly they haunt the big cities now because in places this large, who's going to notice the odd missing person? People disappear every day.

“Time was,” I said, “when we respected each other’s territories. When we put someone under our protection, they stayed that way.”

It was a long shot, but I had this going for me: we’re a prideful people. And honour’s a big thing between us. It has to be, or we’d have wiped each other out a long time ago.

He didn’t like it. I don’t know if I spoke to his honour, or whether it was because he couldn’t place my clan affiliation and didn’t know how big a pack he’d be calling down upon himself if he cut me down and went ahead and had his fun.

“You’re saying she’s your girlfriend?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Okay. Let’s go up and ask her. If she lets you in, we’ll back off. But if she doesn’t . . .”

He let me fill in the blank for myself.

“No problem,” I said.

Not like I had a choice in the matter. This was a win-win situation for him. If she let me in, he could back off without losing face. And if she didn’t, no one in the clans would take my side because it would just look like I was horning in on their claim.

He stepped back and I walked towards Mona’s building. The pack fell in behind me, all of them in human shape now. I glanced up and caught a glimpse of Mona’s terrified face in the window. I tried to look as harmless as possible.

Trust me, I told her, willing the thought up to her. It’s your life that’s hanging in the balance here.

But she only looked more scared.

Then we were on the stairs and I couldn’t see her anymore.

“Don’t even think about trying to warn her,” the alpha-male said from behind me. “She’s got to accept you without a word from you or all bets are off.”

The door to the front hall was locked when I tried it. The alpha-male reached past me and grabbed the knob, giving it a

sharp twist. I heard the lock break, then the door swung open and we were moving inside.

Did I mention that we're stronger than we look?

.

Mona

I was still trying to adjust to the fact that the wolves really had turned into people, when my stalker led them into the apartment building. He looked up at me just before they reached the stairs, his face all pretend sweetness and light, but it didn't fool me. I knew they were going to tear me to pieces.

Get up, get up, I told myself. Call the police. Sneak out onto the fire escape and run for it.

But all I could do was sit on the floor with my back to the window and stare at my front door, listening to their footsteps as they came up the stairs. When they stopped outside my door, I held my breath. Somebody knocked and I just about jumped out of my skin. This uncontrollable urge to laugh rose up in me. Here they were, planning to kill me, yet they were just knocking politely on the door. I was hysterical.

"We can smell you in there."

That wasn't Lyle, but one of his friends.

I shivered and pressed up against the wall behind me.

"Come see us through the peephole," the voice went on. "Your boyfriend wants to know if you'll let him in. Or are you still too mad at him?"

I didn't want to move, but I slowly got to my feet.

"If you don't come soon, we'll huff and we'll puff, just see if we won't."

I stood swaying the middle of my living room, hugging myself. Wishing so desperately that I'd never left the apartment this evening.

"Or maybe," the mocking voice went on, "we'll go chew off the faces of the nice couple living below you. They do smell good."

I was moving again, shuffling forward, away from the phone, towards the door. It was too late to call for help anyway. Nobody was going to get here in time. If they didn't just smash through my door, maybe they really would go kill the Andersons who had the downstairs apartment. And this wasn't their fault. I was the one stupid enough to go out on a blind date with a werewolf.

"That's it," the voice told me. "I can hear you coming. Show us what a good hostess you are. What a forgiving girlfriend."

I was close enough now to hear the chorus of sniggers and giggles that echoed on after the voice had finished. When I reached the door, I rose slowly up on my tiptoes and looked through the peephole.

They were all out there in the hall, my stalker and his pack of werewolf friends.

God, I thought, looking at Lyle, trying to read his face, to understand why he was doing this. How could I ever have thought that I liked him?

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Lyle

I knew it was over now. There was no way Mona was going to open the door—not if she had an ounce of sense in her—but at least I'd gotten the pack into a confined space. I couldn't take them all down, but maybe I could manage a few.

I could smell Mona the same as the pack did—smell her fear. She was numbed by it. But maybe once I set on the pack, it'd snap her out of her paralysis long enough to flee out onto the fire escape I'd noticed running up the side of the building. Or perhaps the noise would be enough for the neighbours to call the police. If they could get here before the pack battered down the door, there was still a chance she could survive.

She was on the other side of the door now. Looking out of the peephole. I tried to compose myself, to give her a look that she might read as hope. To convey that I meant her no harm.

But then the alpha-male gave me a shove. Without thinking, I snarled at him, face partially shifting, jaws snapping. He darted back, laughter triumphant in his eyes, and I knew what he'd done. He'd shown Mona that I was no different from them. Just another skinwalker. Another inhuman creature, hungry for her blood.

"All you have to do is answer a couple of questions," the alpha-male said, facing the door. "Do you forgive your boyfriend? Will you invite him in?"

There was a long silence.

"Why . . . why are you doing this?" Mona finally said, her voice muffled by the door. But we all had a wolf's hearing.

"Tut, tut," the alpha-male said. "You're not playing by the rules. You're not supposed to ask a question, only answer ours."

I knew she was still looking from the peephole.

"I'm sorry, Mona," I said. "For everything."

The alpha-male turned on me with a snarl. I drew him aside before he could speak, my back to the door.

"Come on," I told him, my voice pitched low. "You know we had a quarrel. How's this supposed to be fair with you scaring the crap out of her and here I haven't even apologized to her? I mean, take a vote on it or something."

He turned to his companions. I could see they didn't like it, but my argument made sense.

"Fine," he said. "You've made your apology."

He turned to the door and let his face go animal.

"Well?" he snarled. "What's your answer, little chickadee? Your boyfriend says he's sorry so can he come in and play now?"

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Mona

I almost died when Lyle's face did its half-transformation. The wolfish features disappeared as fast as they had appeared. He turned to me with those beautiful dark eyes of his, and I couldn't see the same meanness and hunger in them that were in the

eyes of the others. And I was looking for it, believe me. Then, while I was still caught in his gaze, he went and apologized to me, like none of this was his doing. Like he was sorry for everything, the same as I was. Not just for what he'd said to me in the café, but because we'd liked each other and then we'd let it all fell apart before we ever gave it a chance to be more.

Call me naïve, or maybe even stupider still, but I believed that apology of his was genuine. It was something he needed to say, or that I needed to hear. Maybe both.

I was so caught up in the thought of that, that I didn't even start when the other guy did his half-wolf face thing and began snarling at me. Instead, I flashed on something Lyle had said to me earlier in the evening, back at the café.

These days most of us just like to fit in, he'd told me. Live a bit in your world, a bit in the animal world. But it wasn't always like that. There have always been those among us who considered everyone else in the world their private prey.

Most of you? I'd asked.

I remember him sighing, almost like he was ashamed, when he'd shaken his head and added, But there are still some that like to hunt.

Like this guy with his animal face and snarl, with his pack of wolfish friends.

But I was done being afraid. I was Rocket Grrl, or at least I was trying to be. I concentrated on this question the wolf-faced leader of the pack kept asking, focusing exactly on what it was he was asking, and why. It felt like a fairy tale moment and I flashed on *Beauty and the Beast*, the prince turned into a frog, the nasty little dwarf who'd moved in on me until an act of kindness set him free. All those stories pivoted around the right thing being said.

That doesn't happen in real life, the rational part of my mind told me.

I knew that. Not usually. But sometimes it did, didn't it?

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Lyle

"Time's up, chickadee," the alpha-male said.

I got myself ready. First I'd try to knock as many of them down the stairs as I could, then I'd shift to wolf shape and give them a taste of what it felt like being hurt. I knew I didn't have a chance against all of them, but I'd still be able to kill a few before they took me down. I'd start with the alpha-male.

Except before I could leap, I heard the deadbolt disengage. The door swung open, and then she was standing there, small and blonde and human-frail, but with more backbone than all of this sorry pack of skinwalkers put together, me included. We all took a step back. Mona cleared her throat.

"So . . . so what you're asking," she said, "is do I forgive Lyle?"

The alpha-male straightened his shoulders. "That's it," he said. "Part one of a two-parter."

She didn't even look at him, her gaze going over his shoulder to me.

"I think we were both to blame," she said. "So of course I do. Do you forgive me?"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I wasn't even worrying about the pack at that moment. I was just so mesmerized with how brave she was. I think the pack was, too.

"Well?" she asked.

All I could do was nod my head.

"Then you can come in," she said. "But not your friends."

"They're not my friends," I told her.

The alpha-male growled with frustration until one of the pack touched his arm.

"That's it," the pack member said. "It's over."

The alpha-male shook off the hand, but he turned away and the pack trooped down the stairs. When I heard the front door close, I let out a breath I hadn't been aware I was holding.

"You were amazing," I told Mona.

She gave me a small smile. "I guess I have my moments."

"I'll say. I don't know how you knew to do it, but you gave them exactly the right answer."

"I wasn't doing it for them," she told me. "I was doing it for us."

I shook my head again. "It's been a weird night, but I'm glad I got to meet you all the same."

I started for the stairs.

"Where are you going?" she asked. "They could be waiting out there for you."

I turned back to look at her. "They won't. It's an honour thing. Maybe if I run into them some other time there'll be trouble, but there won't be any more tonight."

"We never finished our date," she said.

"You still want to go out somewhere with me?"

She shook her head. "But we could have a drink in here and talk awhile."

I waited a heartbeat, but when she stepped aside and ushered me inside, I didn't hesitate any longer.

"I was so scared," she said as she closed the door behind us.

"Me, too."

"Really?"

"There were six of them," I said. "They could have torn me apart at any time."

"Why didn't they?"

"I told them you were my girlfriend—that we'd just had a fight in the café. That way, in their eyes, I had a claim on you. The honour thing again. If you were under my protection, they couldn't hurt you."

"So that's what you meant about my giving them the exact right answer."

I nodded.

"And if I hadn't?" she asked.

"Let's not go there," I said. But I knew she could see the answer in my eyes.

"You'd do that even after what I said to you on the phone?"

"You had every right to feel the way you did."

“Are you for real?”

“I hope so.” I thought about all she’d experienced tonight.

“So are you going to put this in one of your strips?”

She laughed. “Maybe. But who’d believe it?”

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Mona

It’s funny how things work. When I was leaving the café earlier, I could have happily given him a good bang on the ear. Later, when I thought he was stalking me, I was ready to have him put in jail. When the pack was outside my window and he joined them, I was so terrified I couldn’t move or think straight.

And now I’m thinking of asking him to stay the night.



THE WEREWOLF

Tanith Lee

Tanith Lee was born in 1947, in London, England. She began to write at the age of nine. To date, she has written and published over ninety books and nearly three hundred short stories, four dramas for BBC Radio, and two episodes of the cult science fiction TV series *Blake's 7*. Her work, which spans several genres, has been translated into more than seventeen languages and has won a number of awards, including the British Fantasy Award and World Fantasy Award. Norilana Books recently launched a major reprint of Lee's novels, including her Flat Earth, Birthgrave, and Storm Lord series, with original works to follow, while Lethe Press will be publishing her new lesbian and gay fiction. She lives in England near the sea, with her husband, writer-artist John Kaiine.

Lee has written extensively about lycanthropes during her career, exploring the subject in a wide variety of inventive ways. On "The Werewolf" she notes, "The main element of this story, and its inspiration, lay for me in approaching from the angle of a question: What is really more dangerous here, cunning beast or knowing hunter—or simply the modern human dilemma of being unable to *accept* the unbelievable?"



THE HOUSE OVERHUNG A CORNER of the heath, where the columns of the trees climbed up into the lanes and streets above. The building was like an outpost, for no other houses were on the road for half a mile, and the streetlights were few. An occasional car passed by on its speeding way to somewhere else. The house was sometimes noted, for it was Gothic in design and had a high tower, turrets, and tall windows fruited with coloured glass. No one approached, and certainly no one was near enough, on nights of the full moon, to catch the screams within the house of the werewolf, as he was translated into his bestial shape.

It was a hot summer, and at night a low mist lay along the earth. The tree tops were clear, and high above the house stood the smudged white plate of the moon. About eleven, something dark might be seen slinking grotesquely down the outer stairway of the house, between the shrubs.

This was the manner in which the werewolf descended to the heath. The heath was his hunting ground. But not always did he locate prey there, and then not always human—the kind for which he lusted. It was the moonlit night between the trees which drew him primarily, perhaps more than the severe hunger for blood. In the form of such a thing as he became, he could not stay inside the walls of a house, even the Gothic house on the slope.

The heath by night was like a frame of the past. The werewolf's beast eyes did not see the litter of chocolate wrappers, cans, cigarettes and condoms. The beast existed in a world of primal timelessness. The beast did not think, or have a need to.

Now and then, the remains of the werewolf's feasts had been uncovered, and had given rise to an on-going legend of unsolved murder cases, loosely known by the title of *The Heath Hacker*.

Though unnatural they were not rated as *supernatural*, and though once or twice over the years police had called at the isolated house, its occupant had never been under suspicion.

He was a small, mild, fussy man of late middle age, the antithesis of anything dramatic, and obviously without the physical strength the murders had required.

Generally bodies were not found, the very little that had been left of them trampled or buried in leaf mould, under boulders, or rolled into deep bushes. Dogs too were inclined to avoid these kills. They ran to their owners with their tails down and their eyes full of green horror.

The dogs knew what the travellers and the questing police did not.

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"There is a werewolf on the heath," said Constant to Vivienne.

"What rubbish," said Vivienne, a slender white girl of twenty with maroon hair. And, after a pause, "Why do you say such things?"

"Because of the bones. Look," and bending gracefully he picked up a long stick of creamy grey. "A tibia. And over there another. The third evidence I've seen this afternoon."

"Even if it is a bone," said Vivienne, swinging her heavy rufous hair, "it's animal. Picked clean. A fox, maybe."

"Not of a fox or by a fox. I've noticed, none of these bones, therefore none of the carcasses, were dragged into a lair. Normally you'd expect animals to polish off the left-overs whoever caused them, but these they've left strictly alone."

"Terrified by the taint of wolf."

"Not wolf. *Werewolf*. You mustn't confuse the two."

"But I thought," said Vivienne, "that a werewolf was someone who turned into a wolf."

"In a way," said Constant, elusively. He infuriated her subtly, which was the other reason, aside from his handsome foreignness, which attracted Vivienne to him.

"Well," she said, "we're quite safe by daylight, aren't we? It's only at night that werewolves walk, or stalk, or whatever they do."

"The three nights of the full moon. The full moon affects all of us to some extent. It moves the tides of the sea, and the tides of the water which makes up so much of the human composition. How could we not be affected? But to a werewolf the tidal urge draws up its inner nature."

They crossed one of the many tracks of the woodland, and came out in a great meadow lit by flowers and sun.

"What a lovely summer," said Vivienne. "And no people."

"This is the advantage of a week day," said Constant. "At night, of course, people do come here."

"For illicit sex," said Vivienne, primly, having made love with Constant not two hours before.

"And other darker things," said Constant, looking about.

"Murder and evil," said Vivienne.

"You're right," said Constant, "to separate the two concepts. Evil is by itself."

"And the werewolf hunts here," said Vivienne, "over the moonlit grass, chasing the sly rapists and skulking muggers."

"Of course."

"You really believe what you say," accused Vivienne.

They left the meadow and were under the trees again. "This is a fearful place," said Constant, "a sink of ancient crimes. You can only see the yellow flowers and hear the birds singing. At night everything is black and white. The birds hide, the flowers close fast."

"And the werewolf bounds between the trees."

Constant stopped.

Vivienne stopped also and turned to see.

Above the wood the ground ran upwards.

"That's the way on to South Heath Road."

"That house," said Constant.

“Oh that—it’s marvellous, isn’t it,” said Vivienne. “You can see it farther up on the heath too, by Walworth Lane. But here’s best. I used to come and draw it years ago.”

“You were most unwise,” said Constant.

“Nonsense,” said Vivienne, “there were six or seven of us used to come here in a group. Once we saw the funny man who lived there. He came out and sort of hippity-hopped down that stair to put something out over the garden wall.”

“I hope you didn’t go to see what it was.”

“Joanie did. It was a great mound of awful old curtains. There was a place where things were burnt. He was obviously going to burn them sometime.”

“And this man with the curtains,” said Constant, “what was he like?”

“About five feet five, slim in a plump, weak sort of way, with a round pudding of a face. He had thin hair and baggy trousers and a cardigan, and he wore slippers.”

“What a good memory you have,” said Constant slowly.

“I wonder if he still lives there,” pondered Vivienne.

“I should think so.”

They were walking up through the wood towards the house. Its wall and flight of steps hung over them through the poles of the trees and the garlands of thick green leaves.

“There’s the burning place,” said Vivienne. “And look, something’s smouldering there now. Naughty, in this heat.”

“He would find fire attractive,” said Constant, “in his human form. Things that sparkle. Fire, water, jewels.”

“Oh yes?”

“One of the oldest ways to hypnotise his kind,” said Constant, “a diamond in a bowl of water. Or a ruby under a candle. In the human form only. Once transmogrified, nothing can reach him. He is all beast.”

“You think the funny pudding man in slippers is your werewolf?”

"Look at the house," said Constant. "The coloured bright windows, the dark tower."

"Isn't it just too apt?"

"Your reasoning is overly sophisticated," said Constant. "You're dealing here with something very simple, and utterly terrible."

"Brr," said Vivienne. "Can we come back at full moon and see?"

"Tonight is full moon."

"Is it? Well, then. We can lie in wait. Catch him out."

"You don't understand, Vivienne. It's he who would catch you. He would tear you in pieces and devour you."

"Nasty. Then I'd need a silver bullet."

"A silver bullet isn't necessary. Is useless."

"Now you should know," said Vivienne, "you can't kill a werewolf without one."

"It's just a misunderstanding," said Constant. "Usually such executions were carried out by villages in remote places where ammunition was scarce or obsolete. The bullet was made from some holy object melted down, a cross from the church, say, or the replica of a saint. It's the faith of the hunter which assures the shot. Otherwise a werewolf is impossible to kill."

"You mean you must have faith in God."

"Yes, I mean exactly that. Faith in something other than the power of evil."

"I wouldn't be any good then," Vivienne said seriously, after a silence.

"I know. You're too young, Vivienne, and your culture is too young."

"Oh really? Well you're no better."

"My country to yours," he said, "is an old bowed man. And I'm far older, Vivienne, although not in years."

"Then you can kill the werewolf?" she asked, mockingly, as they stood among the trees below the Gothic house, and the birds sang in the sunlight.

"I believe in God," said Constant. "Perhaps I could kill the werewolf. But who said I was going to try?"

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By the late afternoon a golden glow filled the heath, and the dark amber of the shadows lay thickly twisted on the ground between the trees. The things of the day fed and played and darted in the last spaces of sunlight. Everything busied itself, for now time was running out.

The westering sun worked tricks too with the windows of the house, finding in them long daggers of rose red and Egyptian green.

The door was of oak, with a black iron knocker of an imp's head. Constant, standing alone in the porch, considered the knocker, and then used it decisively.

There was an extended interval between the knock and any sound inside the house, but Constant did not knock again. He knew the house's inhabitant was obedient and law-abiding, and would come to answer the summons. Presently there was a faint shuffling from beyond the door. It opened.

"Good afternoon," said Constant.

"Yes?" asked the inhabitant of the house. He was the height Vivienne had described and had to look up half a foot into Constant's face. Though slim, his body was composed of curves, and a little round tummy pushed at his poplin shirt and fawn trousers. His head was also round, and in the round countenance two fish-pale eyes gazed, not unfriendly, into Constant's own. It was a mild creature, shy but trusting. "How can I help you?"

"It was your wonderful house," said Constant.

"My house."

"I was wondering if you would object if I took some photographs? Only for my own personal record. I am intrigued by architecture."

Constant put out his left hand and readjusted the camera case he was holding. Something glittered. The man's eyes shifted

and came to rest there. As Constant put down his hand again, the man's eyes followed it avidly.

"No, no objection, of course. Please feel free."

Constant thanked the obliging householder, who stood and watched him as he went back down the steps, and retreated a little way along the slope. Here he removed from the camera case an impressive looking Nikon, set it up on a monopod, and began apparently to frame a shot.

After Constant had taken two or three photographs of the façade of the house, the man went back inside. Maybe he would watch from windows, between the screens of coloured glass.

Constant went about the building slowly, sometimes ascending the slope, now and then kneeling in the grass.

On the smallest finger of his left hand the diamond flashed in his father's ring, a piece of jewelry which Constant did not normally wear.

After perhaps fifteen minutes, the front door of the house reopened. The man came out and stood watching Constant take a long angled shot of the tower.

"Have you finished? I didn't want to disturb you. I wondered if you'd care for a cup of tea."

English tea, probably from tea-bags, and with milk, had never appealed to Constant, but now he nodded enthusiastically. He returned to the house, having closed up the camera in its case and telescoped the monopod.

"That's very kind of you."

"I thought you might like to see something of the inside as well."

"I would," Constant said.

From a black and white checkerboard floor a stair curved up, a carved indulgence, and highly polished—someone must come in, presumably in the mornings or early afternoons, leaving, in winter, long before it got dark. Above the stair a huge window of crimson lilies and Nile water showered the hall, and their skins, with tinted lights like some beautiful disease.

His host led Constant into a drawing-room. There were two more windows, each with an ornate female figure, perhaps Muses, for they were classically adorned, and with Burne-Jones hair, rather like Vivienne's in colour. Otherwise the room was stuffed full of elderly furniture, bulging couches and chairs and a plethora of small tables. The ceiling was a carousel of plaster shapes, fruits and vines, echoed in a gilt mirror above the fireplace. Despite the attentions of the help, there was an aura of dust, weightless as the deepening sunlight.

They sat down, and the man poured out the tea in a careful, feminine way. Constant took his without milk, and was pleased to note the werewolf had used leaves.

"I hope you got the pictures you wanted."

"I hope so too; the light's a little undependable at this time."

"Yes, the evening draws on. I like this hour of day. I find it restful." Constant smiled politely and raised his cup. "Forgive my saying so, but I'm quite fascinated by your ring."

"A family heirloom," said Constant, "it belonged to my father. Would you like to see it more closely?" He slipped off the ring and handed it to the little man in the poplin shirt. Who grasped it, *absorbed* it, and taking it over to the light, *played* with it, turning it this way and that, over and over, to make it glitter.

Constant surreptitiously timed him. It was a full six minutes before the werewolf turned and said, regretfully, "An excellent stone. I confess I'm drawn to such things—as you are to houses. I have a small collection, some rubies, a diamond."

Constant retrieved the ring from reluctant fingers, and got up. "Thank you for the tea."

"But stay a little longer," said the werewolf, looking at him with luminous lonely eyes. "I can show you over the house."

"That's remarkably kind of you, but unfortunately I have to be in Walworth by seven."

"Meeting a young lady perhaps," said the werewolf, playfully.

"No, actually. Then again I sometimes walk the heath at dusk, the quietest time, I find. Perhaps I could call on you again."

The eyes of the werewolf gave off a peculiar stony flash. Had no one ever noticed this before, police questioning after murders, shopkeepers, the weekly help? It was the beast part of the subconscious brain incoherently communicating. For there were nights like tonight when the full moon rose at dusk. Perhaps it would be possible to add this diamond to the collection? Off what bitten and ravaged fingers, ears and throats had the other trophies come?

"Of course, feel free to knock. I may not answer unless I can be sure it's you. I'm sensibly rather nervous of callers after dark."

He took Constant back across the checkered floor where the colours of the window had deepened to blood and chartreuse.

They parted at the door with expressions of mutual friendliness, having not exchanged their names.

Outside on the mellow heath, Constant studied his watch. Two hours before dark.

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The light perished in stages. Birds quartered the sky, sank and vanished into the high coronas of the trees. A deft rustling in the undergrowth signalled the passaging of other daylight entities to their holes and burrows. A few people came walking along Walworth Lane, heading out of the woodland towards the traffic lights and busy high street of Walworth one mile off along the road.

Constant sat on a fallen tree beside the Lane. Behind him, still partly concealed in bushes, was his motorbike. As the flame began to leave the sky, he drew the bike out and walked it up the steep incline. He stood among the tree trunks, looking down across the umbra of the heath.

To the naked eye, the towered house a quarter of a mile away was quite visible, small and perfect as a model above the trees. It stood in a bowl of gold, the last traces of the sunset. A pale ghost, caught on the rim of the light, the moon had already risen.

The heat of the sky went to ashes.

Constant set the camera on the monopod, and attached the powerful zoom lens. He set his sights for the outer stairway of the house.

The image leapt towards him. He could see the brickwork on the wall, flower heads on the shrubs. As the afterglow faded the sullen marble stare of the moon took over, a cold blind eye.

He saw now in black and white.

Constant waited.

After ten minutes something dark appeared on the stairway. It might have been anything, perhaps a large dog let out. It passed between the shrubs, and paused, and the moon came over the house, so everything was lit up in a cool white searchlight. The thing on the stairway raised its head. Constant saw it through the lens.

It was black like a ball of shadow. The skull was a little too large for the body so that in form it was like a boar, heavy-headed, powerful in the shoulder. The black head was something like a wolf's, with a great ruff of black hair. The mouth came open and all the teeth appeared in the muzzle, not the teeth of a wolf but each pointed, the canines enormous, and between them the movement of a thick black tongue.

Constant touched the button of the camera, and the head swung. Across a quarter mile of dusk and sudden silence, the eyes of the thing on the stair met Constant's eye within the lens. The eyes were red even in moonlight, with a sheen like oil. They held a thousand years of awareness but not a single thought. They were not the eyes of a wolf, but of some creature older and unremittingly terrible, inimical to yet entirely belonging with man. The eyes of a monster not a beast.

Constant depressed the button of the camera.

The tiny click echoed sheer and sharp across the sloping valley. It was the only sound.

The werewolf heard.

Its muzzle wrinkled and its soulless eyes became two pits of blood. Constant heaved the camera free and thrust it and the

lens into their case, folded up the monopod, and slung them on the bike.

Mounting the bike, he gunned the engine into life.

In his vision was the image of the werewolf pouring suddenly over down the stair like a bolt of black liquid.

The motorbike cannoned into motion. It swerved down the hill between the trees and skated out on to the road. Bearing left, it burst forward and the pillars of the trees became a blur. Ground erupted beneath the wheels and was gone.

The bike could outrace death. As he rode between the shadows, Constant murmured a few words of thanks, in Latin.

He was almost off the Lane, when he made out the two figures walking towards him along the edge of the road.

Constant jammed the bike to a standstill.

He waved at them, the two young men in denims and T-shirts, walking hand in hand until they saw him coming, not pleased to encounter him.

"Don't go on to the heath."

"What's he say?" one of them asked the other.

"A member of the Moral Majority," said this other, and grinned.

"There is a wild animal loose," said Constant, "there is danger."

"He's nuts," said the first boy.

"Piss off," said the second boy to Constant.

They shrugged him away and strolled on along the Lane, the black shade of the trees coming down to smother them. The low mist was forming in veils.

Constant shouted after them once. It was useless. What could he tell them they would believe? They would have to take their chances along with the other creatures of the night. Perhaps something might distract the werewolf, it might take a different path. It could not have seen the camera, though it had looked straight at it, and the sound of the button might have been anything. To the thing it was, a camera anyway was senseless.

Constant raced the motorbike on and came to the lights, the intersection, the brink of the high street, its shops, and cars

in flight. Only there, hesitating a moment, did he seem to hear a distant noise, far back among the trees. It might have been a squeal of brakes, the call of a night bird, or a human cry, stripped of all meaning but fear.

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"What have you been doing all afternoon?" asked Vivienne.

"Developing some film."

"Let me see."

"No, there's nothing that would interest you," said Constant.

"You've been back to that house," said Vivienne, shaking her sea-green beads. "What did you find?"

"Which house?" said Constant.

"Did you know, there's been another murder on the heath. Not the Hacker. Did you read about it?"

"I never read newspapers," said Constant.

"It was very gory," said Vivienne. "But a jealous lover, they think. The man was gay. Torn in pieces."

"Just one," said Constant.

The other must have run, perhaps been felled in another place, more thoroughly devoured, or hidden.

"The heath is horrible," said Vivienne petulantly.

"I would advise you then to avoid it," said Constant. "For now."

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The black iron imp knocked against the oak door with especial force, and birds in the neighbouring trees took fright.

Constant attended on the knock as he had done before. And after some while, as before, the door was dutifully opened.

Late afternoon light fell slanting on the curves of the gentle face, the innocent belly. This time the shirt was of grey rayon.

"Good afternoon," said Constant. "Do you remember? I took some photographs of your house and you were kind enough to give me tea."

"Ah, yes," the man said. "I do indeed remember."

"I thought," said Constant, "you might care to see the pictures." With his diamonded left hand he tapped a folder.

"Oh yes, oh yes indeed."

The door was opened wide, and Constant admitted.

Familiar, rose and green fell from the window. In the drawing-room the two Muses were at their stations. A faint cob-web floated high up in the plaster carousel of the ceiling. Peach-coloured, the light leaned on the mirror above the fireplace.

They sat down. One by one, Constant handed the householder his views of the house. Of the tall façade, the windows and the steps, the angled tower.

"These are really quite splendid," said the man, admiringly. "A true professional job. The hour is rather later today; can I offer you a sherry?"

Constant, who did not like sherry, professed pleasure.

The man brought two small glasses of gold and set them on the table where the pictures lay.

"There's one more I should like to show you," Constant said. "It was taken from across the heath, and the sun had gone down. Infrared film. The quality is rather grainy, I'm afraid."

The little man took the photograph and stared at it. He stared a long time.

"But what is this?"

"A view of the outer stairway."

"Yes, I see—but—"

"You notice something on the steps," said Constant.

"Surely," said the werewolf, "only a strange shadow."

"Do shadows have eyes?"

The man laughed uneasily. He took a sip of his sherry. "What can it be, I wonder?"

"Perhaps you own a dog?" said Constant, helpfully.

The man blinked. "No. No dog. I've never been able to get on with animals."

"I wonder what it is, then," said Constant. "It looks like an animal, doesn't it?"

"Yes . . . very like one. How odd." The windows were clouding, the peach ray was gone from the mirror. "Possibly, some light . . ." The man went to a series of lamps and switched them on one by one. The room lit up and the windows turned blue. "Once the sun goes down," said the werewolf, "this house grows very dark."

"The moon was shining when I took the photograph," said Constant. "A full moon, very bright."

The werewolf lifted up the photograph a second time and peered at it shortsightedly. "Probably I should fetch my glasses. I can't make it out at all. What do *you* think it is?"

"Oh," said Constant, "*I* think it's a photograph of you."

"Of me?" The werewolf raised his head.

All at once there was a suggestion of heaviness to his skull and shoulders, something ape-like, and the eyes were flat and thoughtless, some instinct struggling to pierce to their surface. Failing.

"If I had come back last week," said Constant, "there would have been no doubt. But of course the nights of the full moon are over until next month, aren't they?"

"But this isn't human," said the man resentfully.

"Not human? Would you say it was a wolf?"

"Maybe," said the man, cautiously, almost bashfully.

"No, it isn't a wolf," said Constant. "That is a misnomer. The wolf is a clean animal whose eyes are like a man's. What eyes does this thing have? Like the Devil. Perhaps the superstitions of wolves, the lies, what men fear when they hear the cry of a wolf: That. But this is a beast from the swamp at the bottom of man's soul. A beast from the id. Solely man's. Completely *human*."

Constant got up and drew something else out of the folder. He unwrapped it quickly. It was a steak knife from Selfridges.

"No," said the man, moving backwards, judging his route, through long proximity, between the bulky furniture.

“There is another way, of course, to see the change,” said Constant. He ran forward and stuck the knife into the werewolf’s round belly, until only the handle protruded.

The werewolf gave a scream and fell on to the floor. His blood splashed round him. He tried to pull out the knife and did not have the strength.

Constant watched.

Outside was the shadow of a moonless dusk, but in the room the lamps fully illuminated the death-throes. Then they illuminated the long after-spasms as the body altered, the clothes splitting and the skin heaving, the great muscles pumping up and the hair swarming out like a dark forest. Halfway through, the transmogrification ceased, unable to sustain itself without life. What was left on the carpet was a thing one third a man and two thirds some sort of beast, unlike anything yet reminiscent of a wolf. From the guts of this Constant plucked his knife, wrapped it, and replaced it with the photographs in his folder. What the police would say when they were called by the help was a matter for conjecture.

Constant left the lights burning, and went out through the hall. The window cast on him a last meteor shower. The rest of the house hung dark and silent in a void. He closed the door with care, and walked away over the heath in the night.



THE LAME PRIEST

S. Carleton

As with many authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, information about **Susan Carleton Jones** and her work remains somewhat speculative. Born Susan Morrow Jones in Halifax, Nova Scotia, she published fiction in such magazines as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Thrill Book*, and *The Smart Set*, and wrote several novels, including *The La Chance Mine Mystery*, which was released by Little, Brown in 1920. Three pseudonyms are sometimes ascribed to her: S. Carleton (or Carlton), Helen Milecete (or Milicete), and Carleton-Milecete; however the works signed Milecete may have been written either by or in collaboration with her sister, Helen Duffus. Jones died in 1924.

“The Lame Priest” appears to be a solo composition and is set against the lonely, haunted landscape common in Jones’s early short fiction. The story was first published in December, 1901, in both *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Pall Mall Magazine*; it was given the less evocative title “The Wolf” in the latter, but boasts an eerie illustration by Simon Harmon Vedder by way of compensation. After some years as a classroom staple, thanks to a reprint in the 1919 anthology *Atlantic Prose and Poetry*, “The Lame Priest” was largely—and unjustly—forgotten.



IF THE AIR HAD NOT BEEN DECEMBER'S, I should have said there was balm in it. Balm there was, to me, in the sight of the road before me. The first snow of winter had been falling for an hour or more; the barren hill was white with it. What wind there was was behind me, and I stopped to look my fill.

The long slope stretched up till it met the sky, the softly rounded white of it melting into the gray clouds—the dove-brown clouds—that touched the summit, brooding, infinitely gentle. From my feet led the track, sheer white, where old infrequent wheels had marked two channels for the snow to lie; in the middle a clear filmy brown—not the shadow of a color, but the light of one; and the gray and white and brown of it all was veiled and strange with the blue-gray mist of falling snow. So quiet, so kind, it fell, I could not move for looking at it, though I was not halfway home.

My eyes are not very good. I could not tell what made that brown light in the middle of the track till I was on it, and saw it was only grass standing above the snow; tall, thin, feathery autumn grass, dry and withered. It was so beautiful I was sorry to walk on it.

I stood looking down at it, and then, because I had to get on, lifted my eyes to the skyline. There was something black there, very big against the low sky; very swift, too, on its feet, for I had scarcely wondered what it was before it had come so close that I saw it was a man, a priest in his black soutane. I never saw any man who moved so fast without running. He was close to me, at my side, passing me even as I thought it.

“You are hurried, Father,” said I, meaning to be civil.

I see few persons in my house, twelve miles from the settlement, and I had my curiosity to know where this strange priest was going. For he was a stranger.

"To the churchyard, my brother—to the churchyard," he answered, in a chanting voice, yet not the chanting you hear in churches. He was past me as he spoke—five yards past me down the hill.

The churchyard! Yes, there was a burying. Young John Noel was dead these three days. I heard that in the village.

"This priest will be late," I thought, wondering why young John must have two priests to bury him. Father Moore was enough for every one else. And then I wondered why he had called me "brother."

I turned to watch him down the hill, and saw what I had not seen before. The man was lame. His left foot hirpled, either in trick or infirmity. In the shallow snow his track lay black and uneven where the sound foot had taken the weight. I do not know why, but that black track had a desolate look on the white ground, and the black priest hurrying down the hill looked desolate, too. There was something infinitely lonely, infinitely pathetic in that scurrying figure, indistinct through the falling snow.

I had grown chilled standing, and it made me shiver; or else it was the memory of the gaunt face, the eyes that did not look at me, the incredible, swift lameness of the strange priest. However it was, virtue had gone from me. I went on to the top of the hill without much spirit, and into the woods. And in the woods the kindliness had gone from the snowfall. The familiar rocks and stumps were unfamiliar, threatening. Half a dozen times I wondered what a certain thing could be that crouched before me in the dusk, only to find it a rotten log, a boulder in the bare bushes. Whether I hurried faster than I knew, for that unfriendliness around me, I did not trouble to think, but I was in a wringing sweat when I came out at my own clearing. As I crossed it to my door something startled me—what, I do not know. It was only a faint sound, far off, unknown, unrecognizable, but unpleasing. I forgot the door was latched (I leave my house by the window when I go out for the day) and

pushed it sharply. It gave to my hand. There was no stranger inside, at least. An old Indian sat by the smouldering fire, with my dog at his feet.

“Andrew!” said I. “Is anything wrong?”

I had it always in my mind, when he came unexpectedly, that his wife might be dead. She had been smoking her pipe and dying these ten years back.

“I don’ know.” The old man smiled as he carefully shut and barred the door I had left ajar. “He want tobacco, so I come. You good man to me. You not home; I wait and make supper; my meat.” He nodded proudly at the dull embers, and I saw he had an open pot on them, with a hacked-off joint of moose meat. “I make him stew.”

He had done the same thing before, a sort of tacit payment for the tobacco he wanted. I was glad to see him, for I was so hot and tired from my walk home that I knew I must be getting old very fast. It is not good to sit alone in a shack of a winter’s night and know you are getting old very fast.

When there was no more moose meat we drew to the fire. Outside the wind had risen, full of a queer wailing that sounded something like the cry of a loon. I saw Andrew was not ready to start for home, though he had his hat on his head, and I realized I had not got out the tobacco. But when I put it on the table he let it lie.

“You keep me here tonight?” he asked, without a smile, almost anxiously. “Bad night, tonight. Too long way home.”

I was pleased enough, but I asked if the old woman would be lonely.

“He get tobacco tomorrow.” (Andrew had but the masculine third person singular; and why have more, when that serves?) “Girl with him when I come. Tomorrow—”

He listened for an instant to the wind, stared into the fire, and threw so mighty a bark-covered log on it that the flames flew up the chimney.

"Red deer come back to this country!" exclaimed he irrelevantly. "Come down from Maine. Wolves come back, too, over the north ice. I s'pose smell 'em? I don' know."

I nodded. I knew both things, having nothing but such things to know in the corner of God's world I call my own.

Andrew filled his pipe. If I had not been used to him, I could never have seen his eyes were not on it, but on me.

"Tomorrow," he harked back abruptly, "we go 'way. Break up here; go down Lake Mooin."

"Why?" I was astounded. He had not shifted camp for years.

"I say red deer back. Not good here any more."

"But—" I wondered for half a minute if he could be afraid of the few stray wolves which had certainly come, from Heaven knew how far, the winter before. But I knew that was nonsense. It must be something about the deer. How was I to know what his mind got out of them?

"No good," he repeated. He lifted his long brown hand solemnly—"No good here. You come too."

I laughed. "I'm too old! Andrew, who was the strange priest I met today crossing the upland farm?"

"Father Moore—no? Father Underhill?"

"No. Thin, tired-looking, lame."

"Lame! Drag leg? Hurry?" I had never seen him so excited, never seen him stop in full career as now. "I don' know." It was a different man speaking. "Strange priest, not belong here. You come Lake Mooin with me."

"Tell me about the priest first"—though I knew it was useless as I ordered it.

He spat into the fire. "Lame dog, lame woman, lame priest—all no good!" said he. "What time late you sit up here?"

Not late that night, assuredly. I was more tired than I wanted to own. But long after I had gone to my bunk in the corner I saw Andrew's wrinkled face listening in the firelight. He played with something in his hand, and I knew there was that in his

mind which he would not say. The wind had died away; there was no more loon-calling, or whatever it was. I fell asleep to the sound of the fire, the soft pat of snow on the window. But the straight old figure in my chair sat rigid, rigid.

I opened my eyes to broad, dull daylight. Andrew and the tobacco were gone. But on the table was something I did not see till I was setting my breakfast there: three bits of twig, two uprights and a crosspiece; a lakeshore pebble; a bit of charred wood. I supposed it was something about coming back from Lake Mooin to sit by my fire again, and I swept the picture-writing away as I put down my teapot. Afterwards I was glad.

I began to wonder if it would ever stop snowing. Andrew's track from my door was filled up already. I sat down to my fly-tying and my books, with a pipe in my mouth and an old tune at my heart, when I heard a hare shriek out. I will have no traps on my grant—a beggarly hundred acres, not cleared, and never will be; I have no farmer blood—and for a moment I distrusted Andrew. I put on my boots and went out.

The dog plumped into the woods ahead of me, and came back. The hare shrieked again, and was cut off in mid-cry.

"Indian is Indian!" said I savagely. "Andrew!"

But no one answered.

The dog fell behind me, treading in my steps.

In the thick spruces there was nothing; nothing in the opener hardwood, till I came out on a clear place under a big tree, with the snow falling over into my bootlegs. There, stooping in the snow, with his back to me, was a man—the priest of yesterday. Priest or no priest, I would not have it; and I said so.

He smiled tightly, his soutane gathered up around him.

"I do not snare. Look!" He moved aside, and I saw the bloody snow, the dead hare. "Something must have killed it and been frightened away. It is very odd."

He looked round him, as I did, for the fox or wildcat tracks that were not there. Except for my boot-prints from my side,

and his uneven track from his, there was not a mark on the snow. It might have been a wildcat which jumped to some tree, but even so it was queer.

"Very odd," he said again. "Will you have the hare?"

I shook my head. I had no fancy for it.

"It is good meat."

I had turned to see where my dog had gone, but I looked back at the sound of his voice, and was ashamed. Pinched, tired, bedraggled, he held up the hare; and his eyes were sharp with hunger.

I looked for no more phantom tracks; I forgot he had sinned about the hare; I was ashamed that I, well fed, had shamed him, empty, by wondering foolishly about wildcats. Yet even so I had less fancy for that hare than ever.

"Let it lie," said I. "I have better meat, and I suppose the beasts are hungry as well as we. If you are not hurried, come in and have a bite with me. I see few strangers out here. You would do me a kindness."

A very strange look came on his face. "A kindness!" he exclaimed. "I—do a kindness!"

He seemed so taken aback that I wondered if he were not a little mad. I do not like madmen, but I could not turn round on him.

"You are off the track to anywhere," I explained. "There are no settlements for a hundred miles back of me. If you come in, I will give you your bearings."

"Off the track!" he repeated, almost joyfully. "Yes, yes. But I am very strong. I suppose"—his voice dragged into a whisper—"I shall not be able to help getting back to a settlement again. But—" He looked at me for the first time, with considering eyes like a dog's, only more afraid, less gentle. "You are a good man, brother," he said. "I will come."

He cast a shuddering glance at the hare, and threw it behind him. As I turned to go he drifted lamely after me, just as a homeless dog does, half hope, half terrified suspicion. But

I fancied he laid a greedy eye at the bloody hare after he had turned away from it.

Somehow, he was not a comfortable companion, and I was sorry I was alone. I whistled for my dog, but he had run home. He liked neither snow nor strangers. I saw his great square head in my bed as I let the priest in, and I knew he was annoyed. Dogs are funny things.

Mad or sane, that priest ate ravenously. When he had finished his eyes were steadier, though he started frightfully when I dropped some firewood—started toward the door.

“Were you in time for the funeral yesterday, Father?” I asked, to put him at his ease.

But at first he did not answer.

“I turned back,” he said at last, in the chanting voice of yesterday. “You live alone, brother? Alone, like me, in the wilderness?”

I said yes. I supposed he was one of the Indian priests who live alone indeed. He was no town priest, for his nails were worn to the quick.

“You should bar your door at night,” he continued slowly, as if it were a distasteful duty. “These woods are not—not as they were.”

Here was another warning, the second in twenty-four hours. I forgot about his being crazy.

“I always bar it.” I answered shortly enough. I was tired of these child’s terrors, all the more that I myself had felt evil in the familiar woods only yesterday.

“Do more!” cried the priest. He stood up, a taller man than I had thought him, a gaunt, hunted-looking man in his shabby black. “Do more! After nightfall keep your door shut, even to knocking; do not open it for any calling. The place is a bad place, and treachery—” He stopped, looked at the table, pointed at something. “Would you mind,” said he, “turning down that loaf? It is not—not true!”

I saw the loaf bottom up on the platter, and remembered. It is an old custom of silent warning that the stranger in the

house is a traitor. But I had no one to warn. I laughed, and turned the loaf.

“Of course there is no traitor.”

If ever I saw gratitude, it was in his eyes, yet he spoke peevishly: “Not now; but there might be. And so I say to you, after nightfall do not open your door—till the Indians come back.”

Then he was an Indian priest. I wondered why Andrew had lied about him.

“What is this thing”—I was impatient—“that you and they are afraid of? Look out there.” I opened the door (for the poor priest, to be truthful, was not savory), and pointed to the quiet clearing, the soft-falling snow, the fringe of spruces that were the vanguard of the woods. “Look there, and tell me what there is in my own woods that has not been there these twelve years past! Yet first an Indian comes with hints and warnings, and then you.”

“What warnings?” he cried. “The Indian’s, I mean! What warnings?”

“I am sure I do not know.” I was thoroughly out of temper; I was not always a quiet old man in a lonely shack. “Something about the red deer coming back, and the place being bad.”

“That is nonsense about the red deer,” returned the priest, not in the least as if he meant it.

“Nonsense or not, it seems to have sent the Indians away.”

I could not help sounding dry. I hate these silly mysteries.

He turned his back to me, and began to prowls about the room. I had opened my mouth to speak, when he forestalled me.

“You have been kind to an outcast priest.” He spoke plainly. “I tell you in return to go away; I tell you earnestly. Or else I ask you to promise me that for no reason will you leave your house after dark, or your door on the latch, till the Indians come back—” He stopped in the middle of a word, the middle of a step, his lame leg held up drolly. “What is that?”

It was more like the howl of a wild beast than a question, and I spun round pretty sharply. The man was crazier than I liked.

“That rubbish of twigs and stones? The Indian left them. They mean something about his coming back, I suppose.”

I could not see what he was making such a fuss about. He stood in that silly, arrested attitude, and his lips had drawn back from his teeth in a kind of snarl. I stooped for the things, and it was exactly as if he snapped at me.

“Let them be. I—I have no fancy for them. They are a heathen charm.”

He backed away from them, drew close to the open door, and stood with a working face—the saddest sight of fierce and weary ruin, of effort to speak kindly, that ever I saw.

“They’re just a message,” I began.

“That you do not understand.” He held up his hand for silence, more priest and less madman than I had yet seen him. “I will tell you what they mean. The twigs, two uprights and a crosspiece, mean to keep your door shut; the stone is—the stone does not matter—call it a stranger; the charcoal”—for all the effort he was making his hand fell, and I thought he trembled—“the charcoal—”

I stooped mechanically to put the things as he described them, as Andrew had left them; but his cry checked me.

“Let the cruel things be! The charcoal means the unlucky, the burned-out souls whose bodies live accursed. No, I will not touch them, either. But do you lay them as you found them, night after night, at your door, and—and”—he was fairly grinding his teeth with the effort; even an outcast priest may feel shame at believing in heathenry—“and the unlucky, the unhappy, must pass by.”

I do not know why such pity came on me, except that it is not right to see into the soul of any man, and I knew the priest must be banned, and thought Andrew had meant to warn me against him. I took the things, twigs, stone, and charcoal, and threw them into the fire.

“I’d sooner they came in,” I said.

But the strange priest gave me a look of terror, of agony. I thought he wrung his hands, but I could not tell. As if I had struck him he was over my threshold, and scurrying away with his swift lameness into the woods and the thin-falling snow. He went the way we had come in the morning, the way of the dead hare. I could not help wondering if he would take it with him if it were still there. I was sorry I had not asked him where he was going; sorrier I had not filled his pockets with food. I turned to put away my map of the district, and it was gone. He must have moved more silently than a wolf to have stolen it, but stolen it was. I could not grudge it, if I would rather have given it. I went to the bunk to pull out my sulky dog, and stood amazed. Those books lie which say dogs do not sweat.

"The priest certainly had a bad smell," I exclaimed, "but nothing to cause all this fuss! Come out!"

But he only crawled abjectly to the fire, and presently lifted his great head and howled.

"Snow or no snow, priest or no priest," said I, "we will go out to get rid of these vapors"; for I had not felt much happier with my guest than had the dog.

When we came back we had forgotten him; or—why should I lie?—the dog had. I could not forget his lameness, his poor, fierce, hungry face. I made a prayer in my bed that night. (I know it is not a devout practice, but if the mind kneels I hold the body does not matter, and my mind has been kneeling for twenty years.)

"For all that are in agony and have none to pray for them, I beseech thee, O God!" And I meant the priest, as well as some others.

But, however it was, I heard—I mean I saw—no more of him. I had never heard of him so much as his name.

Christmas passed. In February I went down to the village, and there I heard what put the faint memory of the lame man out of my head. The wolves who had followed the red deer were killing, not deer in the woods, but children in the settlements.

The village talked of packs of wolves, and Heaven knew how many children. I thought, if it came to bare truth, there might have been three children eaten, instead of the thirty rumor made them, and that for the fabled pack there probably stood two or three brutes, with a taste for human flesh, and a distaste for the hard running of pulling down a deer. And before I left the village I met a man who told the plain tale.

There had been ten children killed or carried off, but there had been no pack of wolves concerned, nor even three nor two. One lame wolf's track led from each robbed house, only to disappear on some highroad. More than that, the few wolves in the woods seemed to fear and shun the lonely murderer; were against him as much as the men who meant to hunt him down.

It was a queer story; I hardly thought it held water, though the man who told it was no romance-maker. I left him, and went home over the hard shining of the crusted snow, wondering why the good God, if he had not meant his children to kill, should have made the winter so long and hard.

Yellow shafts of low sunlight pierced the woods as I threaded them, and if they had not made it plain that there was nothing abroad I should have thought I heard something padding in the underbrush. But I saw nothing till I came out on my own clearing, and there I jerked up with surprise.

The lame priest stood with his back to my window—stood on a patch of tramped and bloody snow.

"Will you never learn sense?" he whined at me. "This is no winter to go out and leave your window unfastened. If I had not happened by, your dog would be dead."

I stared at him. I always left the window ajar, for the dog to go out and in.

"I came by," drawled the priest, as if he were passing every day, "and found your dog out here with three wolves on him. I—I beat them off." He might speak calmly, but he wiped the sweat from his face. "I put him in by the window. He is only torn."

"But you—" My wits came back to me. I thanked him as a man does who has only a dumb beast to cherish. "Why did you not go in, too? You must be frozen."

He shook his head. "The dog is afraid of me; you saw that," he answered simply. "He was better alone. Besides, I had my hands full at the time."

"Are you hurt?"

I would have felt his ragged clothes, but he flinched away from me.

"They were afraid, too!" He gave a short laugh. "And now I must go. Only be careful. For all you knew, there might have been wolves beside you as you came. And you had no gun."

I knew now why he looked neither cold nor like a man who has been waiting. He had made the window safe for the dog inside, and run through the woods to guard me. I was full of wonder at the strangeness of him, and the absurd gratitude; I forgot—or rather, I did not speak of—the stolen map. I begged him to come in for the night. But he cut me off in the middle.

"I am going a long way. No, I will not take a gun. I have no fear."

"These wolves are too much!" I cried angrily. "They told me in the village that a lame one had been harrying the settlements. I mean a wolf—" Not for worlds would I have said anything about lameness if I had remembered his.

"Do they say that?" he asked, his gaunt and furrowed face without expression. "Oh, you need not mind me. It is no secret that I—I too am lame. Are they sure?"

"Sure enough to mean to kill him." Somehow, my tongue faltered over it.

"So they ought." He spoke in his throat. "But—I doubt if they can!" He straightened himself, looked at the sun with a queer face. "I must be going. You need not thank me—except, if there comes one at nightfall, do not, for my memory, let him in. Good-night, brother."

And, "Good-night, brother," said I.

He turned, and drifted lamely out of the clearing. He was out of my sight as quickly as if he had gone into the ground. It was true about the wolves: there were their three tracks, and the priest's tracks running to the place where they had my dog down. If, remembering the hare, I had had other thoughts, I was ashamed of them. I was sorry I had not asked in the village about this strange man who beat off wolves with a stick; but I had, unfortunately, not known it in the village.

I was to know. Oh, I was to know!

It may have been a month after—it was near sunset of a bitter day—when I saw the lame priest again.

Lame indeed. Bent double as if with agony, limping horribly, the sweat on his white face, he stumbled to my door. His hand was at his side; there was a dry blood stain round his mouth; yet even while he had to lean against the doorpost he would not let me within arm reach of him, but edged away.

"Come in, man." I was appalled. "Come in. You—are you hurt?" I thought I saw blood on his soutane, which was in flinders.

He shook his head. Like a man whose minutes are numbered, he looked at the sun; and, like a man whose minutes are numbered, could not hurry his speech.

"Not I," he said at last. "But there is a poor beast out there," nodding vaguely, "a—a dog, that has been wounded. I—I want some rags to tie up the wound, a blanket to put over him. I cannot leave him in his—his last hour."

"You can't go. I'll put him out of his misery: that will be better than blankets."

"It might," muttered he, "it might, if you could! But I must go."

I said I would go, too. But at that he seemed to lose all control of himself, and snarled out at me.

"Stay at home. I will not have you. Hurry. Get me the things."

His eyes—and, on my soul, I thought death was glazing them—were on the sinking sun when I came out again, and

for the first time he did not edge away from me. I should have known without telling that he had been caring for some animal by the smell of his clothes.

"My brother that I have treated brotherly, as you me," he said, "whether I come back this night or not, keep your door shut. Do not come out—if *I had strength to kneel, I would kneel to you*—for any calling. And I, I that ask you have loved you well; I have tried to serve you, except" (he had no pause, no awkwardness) "in the matter of that map; but you had burned the heathen charm, and I had to find a way to keep far off from you. I am—I am a driven man!"

"There will be no calling." I was puzzled and despairing. "There has been none of that loon-crying, or whatever it was, since the night I first met you. If you would treat me as a brother, come back to my house and sleep. I will not hurt your wounded dog," though even then I knew it was no dog.

"I treat you as I know best," he answered passionately. "But if in the morning I do not come—" He seized the blanket, the rags; bounded from me in the last rays of sunlight, dragging his burden in the snow. As he vanished with his swift, incredible lameness, his voice came back high and shrill: "If I do not come in the morning, come out and give—give my dog burial. For the love of"—he was screaming—"for the love I bore you—Christian burial!"

If I had not stayed to shut the door, I should not have lost him. Until dark I called, I beat every inch of cover. All the time I had a feeling that he was near and evading me, and at last I stopped looking for him. For all I knew he might have a camp somewhere; and camp or none, he had said pretty plainly he did not want me. I went home, angry and baffled.

It was a freezing night. The very moon looked fierce with cold. The shack snapped with frost as I sat down to the supper I could not eat for the thought of the poor soul outside; and as I sat I heard a sound, a soft, imploring call—the same, only nearer and more insistent, as the cry on the wind the night after I first

saw the priest. I was at the door, when something stopped me. I do not exaggerate when I say the mad priest's voice was in my ears: "If there comes one to your door after nightfall, do not let him in. Do not open for any crying. *If I had strength to kneel, I would kneel to you.*"

I do not think any pen on earth could put down the entreaty of that miserable voice, but even remembering it I would have disregarded it if, before I could so much as draw breath, that soft calling had not broken into a great ravening howl, bestial, full of malice. For a moment I thought the priest had come back raving mad; I thought silly thoughts of my cellar and my medicine chest; but as I turned for my knitted sash to tie him with, the horrid howl came again, and I knew it was no man, but a beast. Or I think that is a lie. I knew nothing, except that outside was something more horrible than I had ever dreamed of, and that I could not open my door.

I did go to the window; I put a light there for the priest to see, if he came; but I did no more. That very day I had said, "There will be no more calling," and here, in my sober senses, stood and sweated because my words were turned into a lie.

There seemed to be two voices, yet I knew it was but one. First would come the soft wailing, with the strange drawing in it. There was more terror for me in that than in the furious snarl to which it always changed; for while it was imploring it was all I could do not to let in the one who cried out there. Just as I could withstand no longer the ravening malice of the second cry would stop me short. It was as if one called and one forbade me. But I knew there were no two things outside.

I may as well set down my shame and be done. I was afraid. I stood holding my frantic dog, and dared not look at the unshuttered window, black and shining like new ice in the lamplight, lest I should see I knew not what inhuman face looking at me through the frail pane. If I had had the heathen charm, I should have fallen to the cowardice of using it.

It may have been ten minutes that I stood with frozen blood. All I am sure of is that I came to my senses with a great start, remembering the defenseless priest outside. I shut up my dog, took my gun, opened my door in a fury, and—did not shoot.

Not ten yards from me a wolf crouched in the snow, a dark and lonely thing. My gun was in my shoulder, but as he came at me the sound that broke from his throat loosened my arm. It was human. There is no other word for it. As I stood, sick and stupid, the poor brute stopped his rush with a great slither in the snow that was black with his blood in the moonlight, and ran—ran terribly, lamely, from my sight—but not before I had seen a wide white bandage bound round his gray-black back and breast.

“The priest’s dog!” I said. I thought a hundred things, and dared not meddle with what I did not understand.

I searched as best I might for what I knew I should not find—searched till the dawn broke in a lurid sky; and under that crimson light I found the man I had called brother on the crimson snow. And as I hope to die in a house and in my bed, my rags I gave for the dying beast were round his breast, my blanket huddled at his hand. But his face, as I looked on him, I should not have known, for it was young. I put down my loaded gun, that I was glad was loaded still, and I carried the dead home. I saw no wounded wolf nor the trace of one, except the long track from my door to the priest’s body, and *that* was marked by neither teeth nor claws, but, under my rags, with bullets.

Well, he had his Christian burial!—though Father Moore, good, smooth man, would not hear my tale.

The dead priest had been outcast by his own will, not the Church’s; had roamed the country for a thousand miles, a thing afraid and a thing of fear. And now someone had killed him, perhaps by mistake.

“Who knows?” finished Father Moore softly. “Who knows? But I will have no hue and cry made about it. He was once, at

least, a servant of God, and these,”—he glanced at the queer-looking bullets that had fallen from the dead man’s side as I made him ready for burial—“I will encourage no senseless superstition in my people by trying to trace these. Especially—” But he did not finish.

So we dug the priest’s grave, taking turn by turn, for we are not young; and his brother in God buried him. What either of us thought about the whole matter he did not say.

But the very day after, while the frozen mound of consecrated earth was raw in the sunshine, Andrew walked in at my door.

“We come back,” he announced. “All good here now! Lame wolf dead. Shoot him after dark, silver bullet. Wēgŭlădīmōōch. Bochtŭsŭm.”¹

He said never a word about the new grave. And neither did I.

¹ Evil spirit, wolf. Wēgŭlădīmōōch is a word no Indian cares to say.



IN THE LOST LANDS

by George R. R. Martin

Though proclaimed “the American Tolkien” by *Time* magazine for his bestselling *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, **George R. R. Martin** has produced a body of work that encompasses far more than epic fantasy. From the science fiction masterpieces “Sandkings” and “Nightflyers” to the classic vampire novel *Fevre Dream* to the underrated fantasy-tinged mystery *The Armageddon Rag* and the Wild Cards shared-world superhero series, Martin has consistently shown an ability to weave stories that both embrace and expand their genres. He explored werewolf culture in his 1988 novella “The Skin Trade,” for which he received the World Fantasy Award, only one of many major honors his work has gathered in the past four decades.

With “In the Lost Lands,” Martin approaches the shapeshifter theme in a high fantasy context. As he notes in his collection *Dreamsongs*, “Lost Lands” was intended as the opening installment of a series, which sadly has never progressed beyond a few pages of an unfinished sequel. As for the story’s inspiration, Martin attributes that, in part, to a song; the clue to just which song that might be can be found in the opening line.



YOU CAN BUY ANYTHING you might desire from Gray Alys.
But it is better not to.

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The Lady Melange did not come herself to Gray Alys. She was said to be a clever and a cautious young woman, as well as exceedingly fair, and she had heard the stories. Those who dealt with Gray Alys did so at their own peril, it was said. Gray Alys did not refuse any of those who came to her, and she always got them what they wanted. Yet somehow, when all was done, those who dealt with Gray Alys were never happy with the things that she brought them, the things that they had wanted. The Lady Melange knew all this, ruling as she did from the high keep built into the side of the mountain. Perhaps that was why she did not come herself.

Instead, it was Jerais who came calling on Gray Alys that day; Blue Jerais, the lady's champion, foremost of the paladins who secured her high keep and led her armies into battle, captain of her colorguard. Jerais wore an underlining of pale blue silk beneath the deep azure plate of his enameled armor. The sigil on his shield was a maelstrom done in a hundred subtle hues of blue, and a sapphire large as an eagle's eye was set in the hilt of his sword. When he entered Gray Alys' presence and removed his helmet, his eyes were a perfect match for the jewel in his sword, though his hair was a startling and inappropriate red.

Gray Alys received him in the small, ancient stone house she kept in the dim heart of the town beneath the mountain. She waited for him in a windowless room full of dust and the smell of mold, seated in an old high-backed chair that seemed to dwarf her small, thin body. In her lap was a gray rat the size of a small dog. She stroked it languidly as Jerais entered

and took off his helmet and let his bright blue eyes adjust to the dimness.

"Yes?" Gray Alys said at last.

"You are the one they call Gray Alys," Jerais said.

"I am."

"I am Jerais. I come at the behest of the Lady Melange."

"The wise and beautiful Lady Melange," said Gray Alys. The rat's fur was soft as velvet beneath her long, pale fingers. "Why does the Lady send her champion to one as poor and plain as I?"

"Even in the keep, we hear tales of you," said Jerais.

"Yes."

"It is said, for a price, you will sell things strange and wonderful."

"Does the Lady Melange wish to buy?"

"It is said also that you have powers, Gray Alys. It is said that you are not always as you sit before me now, a slender woman of indeterminate age, clad all in gray. It is said that you become young and old as you wish. It is said that sometimes you are a man, or an old woman, or a child. It is said that you know the secrets of shapeshifting, that you go abroad as a great cat, a bear, a bird, and that you change your skin at will, not as a slave to the moon like the werewolf of the lost lands."

"All of these things are said," Gray Alys acknowledged.

Jerais removed a small leather bag from his belt and stepped closer to where Gray Alys sat. He loosened the drawstring that held the bag shut, and spilled out the contents on the table by her side. Gems. A dozen of them, in as many colors. Gray Alys lifted one and held it to her eye, watching the candle flame through it. When she placed it back among the others, she nodded at Jerais and said, "What would the Lady buy of me?"

"Your secret," Jerais said, smiling. "The Lady Melange wishes to shapeshift."

"She is said to be young and beautiful," Gray Alys replied. "Even here beyond the keep, we hear many tales of her. She has

no mate but many lovers. All of her colorguard are said to love her, among them yourself. Why should she wish to change?"

"You misunderstand. The Lady Melange does not seek youth or beauty. No change could make her fairer than she is. She wants from you the power to become a beast. A wolf."

"Why?" asked Gray Alys.

"That is none of your concern. Will you sell her this gift?"

"I refuse no one," said Gray Alys. "Leave the gems here. Return in one month, and I shall give you what the Lady Melange desires."

Jerais nodded. His face looked thoughtful. "You refuse no one?"

"No one."

He grinned crookedly, reached into his belt, and extended his hand to her. Within the soft blue crushed velvet of his gloved palm rested another jewel, a sapphire even larger than the one set in the hilt of his sword. "Accept this as payment, if you will. I wish to buy for myself."

Gray Alys took the sapphire from his palm, held it up between thumb and forefinger against the candle flame, nodded, and dropped it among the other jewels. "What would you have, Jerais?"

His grin spread wider. "I would have you fail," he said. "I do not want the Lady Melange to have this power she seeks."

Gray Alys regarded him evenly, her steady gray eyes fixed on his own cold blue ones. "You wear the wrong color, Jerais," she said at last. "Blue is the color of loyalty, yet you betray your mistress and the mission she entrusted to you."

"I am loyal," Jerais protested. "I know what is good for her, better than she knows herself. Melange is young and foolish. She thinks it can be kept secret, when she finds this power she seeks. She is wrong. And when the people know, they will destroy her. She cannot rule these folk by day, and tear out their throats by night."

Gray Alys considered that for a time in silence, stroking the great rat that lay across her lap. "You lie, Jerais," she said when she spoke again. "The reasons you give are not your true reasons."

Jerais frowned. His gloved hand, almost casually, came to rest on the hilt of his sword. His thumb stroked the great sapphire set there. "I will not argue with you," he said gruffly. "If you will not sell to me, give me back my gem and be damned with you!"

"I refuse no one," Gray Alys replied.

Jerais scowled in confusion. "I shall have what I ask?"

"You shall have what you want."

"Excellent," said Jerais, grinning again. "In a month, then!"

"A month," agreed Gray Alys.

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And so Gray Alys sent the word out, in ways that only Gray Alys knew. The message passed from mouth to mouth through the shadows and alleys and the secret sewers of the town, and even to the tall houses of scarlet wood and colored glass where dwelled the noble and the rich. Soft gray rats with tiny human hands whispered it to sleeping children, and the children shared it with each other, and chanted a strange new chant when they skipped rope. The word drifted to all the army outposts to the east, and rode west with the great caravans into the heart of the old empire of which the town beneath the mountain was only the smallest part. Huge leathery birds with the cunning faces of monkeys flew the word south, over the forests and the rivers, to a dozen different kingdoms, where men and women as pale and terrible as Gray Alys herself heard it in the solitude of their towers. Even north, past the mountains, even into the lost lands, the word traveled.

It did not take long. In less than two weeks, he came to her. "I can lead you to what you seek," he told her. "I can find you a werewolf."

He was a young man, slender and beardless. He dressed in the worn leathers of the rangers who lived and hunted in the windswept desolation beyond the mountains. His skin had the deep tan of a man who spent all his life outdoors, though his hair was as white as mountain snow and fell about his shoulders, tangled and unkempt. He wore no armor and carried a long knife instead of a sword, and he moved with a wary grace. Beneath the pale strands of hair that fell across his face, his eyes were dark and sleepy. Though his smile was open and amiable, there was a curious indolence to him as well, and a dreamy, sensuous set to his lips when he thought no one was watching. He named himself Boyce.

Gray Alys watched him and listened to his words and finally said, "Where?"

"A week's journey north," Boyce replied. "In the lost lands."

"Do you dwell in the lost lands, Boyce?" Gray Alys asked of him.

"No. They are no fit place for dwelling. I have a home here in town. But I go beyond the mountains often, Gray Alys. I am a hunter. I know the lost lands well, and I know the things that live there. You seek a man who walks like a wolf. I can take you to him. But we must leave at once, if we are to arrive before the moon is full."

Gray Alys rose. "My wagon is loaded, my horses are fed and shod. Let us depart, then."

Boyce brushed the fine white hair from his eyes, and smiled lazily.

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The mountain pass was high and steep and rocky, and in places barely wide enough for Gray Alys' wagon to pass. The wagon was a cumbersome thing, long and heavy and entirely enclosed, once brightly painted but now faded so by time and weather that its wooden walls were all a dreary gray. It rode on six

clattering iron wheels, and the two horses that pulled it were of necessity monsters half again the size of normal beasts. Even so, they kept a slow pace through the mountains. Boyce, who had no horse, walked ahead or alongside, and sometimes rode up next to Gray Alys. The wagon groaned and creaked. It took them three days to ascend to the highest point on the mountain road, where they looked through a cleft in the mountains out onto the wide barren plains of the lost lands. It took them three more days to descend.

"Now we will make better time," Boyce promised Gray Alys when they reached the lost lands themselves. "Here the land is flat and empty, and the going will be easy. A day now, perhaps two, and you shall have what you seek."

"Yes," said Gray Alys.

They filled the water barrels full before they left the mountains, and Boyce went hunting in the foothills and returned with three black rabbits and the carcass of a small deer, curiously deformed, and when Gray Alys asked him how he had brought them down with only a knife as a weapon, Boyce smiled and produced a sling and sent several small stones whistling through the air. Gray Alys nodded. They made a small fire and cooked two of the rabbits, and salted the rest of the meat. The next morning, at dawn, they set off into the lost lands.

Here they moved quickly indeed. The lost lands were a cold and empty place, and the earth was packed as hard and firm as the roads that wound through the empire beyond the mountains. The wagon rolled along briskly, creaking and clattering, shaking a bit from side to side as it went. In the lost lands there were no thickets to cut through, no rivers to cross. Desolation lay before them on all sides, seemingly endless. From time to time they saw a grove of trees, gnarled and twisted all together, limbs heavy with swollen fruit with skin the color of indigo, shining. From time to time they clattered through a shallow, rocky stream, none deeper than ankle level. From time to time vast patches of white fungus blanketed the desolate gray earth. Yet

all these things were rare. Mostly there was only the emptiness, the shuddering dead plains all around them, and the winds. The winds were terrible in the lost lands. They blew constantly, and they were cold and bitter, and sometimes they smelled of ash, and sometimes they seemed to howl and shriek like some poor doomed soul.

At last they had come far enough so Gray Alys could see the end of the lost lands: another line of mountains far, far north of them, a vague bluish-white line across the gray horizon. They could travel for weeks and not reach those distant peaks, Gray Alys knew, yet the lost lands were so flat and so empty that even now they could make them out, dimly.

At dusk Gray Alys and Boyce made their camp, just beyond a grove of the curious tortured trees they had glimpsed on their journey north. The trees gave them a partial respite from the fury of the wind, but even so they could hear it, keening and pulling at them, twisting their fire into wild suggestive shapes.

"These lands are lost indeed," Gray Alys said as they ate.

"They have their own beauty," Boyce replied. He impaled a chunk of meat on the end of his long knife, and turned it above the fire. "Tonight, if the clouds pass, you will see the lights rippling above the northern mountains, all purple and gray and maroon, twisting like curtains caught in this endless wind."

"I have seen those lights before," said Gray Alys.

"I have seen them many times," Boyce said. He bit off a piece of meat, pulling at it with his teeth, and a thin line of grease ran down from the corner of his mouth. He smiled.

"You come to the lost lands often," Gray Alys said.

Boyce shrugged. "I hunt."

"Does anything live here?" asked Gray Alys. "Live amidst all this desolation?"

"Oh yes," Boyce replied. "You must have eyes to find it, you must know the lost lands, but it is there. Strange twisted beasts never seen beyond the mountains, things out of legends and nightmares, enchanted things and accursed things, things whose

flesh is impossibly rare and impossibly delicious. Humans, too, or things that are almost human. Werewolf and changelings and gray shapes that walk only by twilight, shuffling things half-living and half-dead." His smile was gentle and taunting. "But you are Gray Alys, and all this you must know. It is said you came out of the lost lands yourself once, long ago."

"It is said," Gray Alys answered.

"We are alike, you and I," Boyce replied. "I love the town, the people, song and laughter and gossip. I savor the comforts of my house, good food, and good wine. I relish the players who come each fall to the high keep and perform for the Lady Melange. I like fine clothes and jewels and soft, pretty women. Yet part of me is only at home here, in the lost lands, listening to the wind, watching the shadows warily each dusk, dreaming things the townsfolk never dare." Full dark had fallen by then. Boyce lifted his knife and pointed north, to where dim lights had begun to glow faintly against the mountains. "See there, Gray Alys. See how the lights shimmer and shift. You can see shapes in them if you watch long enough. Men and women and things that are neither, moving against the darkness. Their voices are carried by the wind. Watch and listen. There are great dramas in those lights, plays grander and stranger than any ever performed on the Lady's stage. Do you hear? Do you see?"

Gray Alys sat on the hard-packed earth with her legs crossed and her gray eyes unreadable, watching in silence. Finally she spoke. "Yes," she said, and that was all.

Boyce sheathed his long knife and came around the campfire—it had died now to a handful of dim reddish embers—to sit beside her. "I knew you would see," he said. "We are alike, you and I. We wear the flesh of the city, but in our blood the cold wind of the lost lands is blowing always. I could see it in your eyes, Gray Alys."

She said nothing; she sat and watched the lights, feeling the warm presence of Boyce beside her. After a time he put an

arm about her shoulders, and Gray Alys did not protest. Later, much later, when the fire had gone entirely dark and the night had grown cold, Boyce reached out and cupped her chin within his hand and turned her face to his. He kissed her, once, gently, full upon her thin lips.

And Gray Alys woke, as if from a dream, and pushed him back upon the ground and undressed him with sure, deft hands and took him then and there. Boyce let her do it all. He lay upon the chill hard ground with his hands clasped behind his head, his eyes dreamy and his lips curled up in a lazy, complacent smile, while Gray Alys rode him, slowly at first, then faster and faster, building to a shuddering climax. When she came her body went stiff and she threw her head back; her mouth opened, as if to cry out, but no sound came forth. There was only the wind, cold and wild, and the cry it made was not a cry of pleasure.

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The next day dawned chill and overcast. The sky was full of thin, twisted gray clouds that raced before them faster than clouds ought to race. What light filtered through seemed wan and colorless. Boyce walked beside the wagon while Gray Alys drove it forward at a leisurely pace. "We are close now," Boyce told her. "Very close."

"Yes."

Boyce smiled up at her. His smile had changed since they had become lovers. It was fond and mysterious, and more than a bit indulgent. It was a smile that presumed. "Tonight," he told her.

"The moon will be full tonight," Gray Alys said.

Boyce smiled and pushed the hair from his eyes and said nothing.

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Well before dusk, they drew up amidst the ruins of some nameless town long forgotten even by those who dwelled in the

lost lands. Little remained to disturb the sweeping emptiness, only a huddle of broken masonry, forlorn and pitiful. The vague outlines of town walls could still be discerned, and one or two chimneys remained standing, jagged and half-shattered, gnawing at the horizon like rotten black teeth. No shelter was to be found here, no life. When Gray Alys had fed her horses, she wandered through the ruins but found little. No pottery, no rusted blades, no books. Not even bones. Nothing at all to hint of the people who had once lived here, if people they had been.

The lost lands had sucked the life out of this place and blown away even the ghosts, so not a trace of memory remained. The shrunken sun was low on the horizon, obscured by scuttling clouds, and the scene spoke to her with the wind's voice, cried out in loneliness and despair. Gray Alys stood for a long time, alone, watching the sun sink while her thin tattered cloak billowed behind her and the cold wind bit through into her soul. Finally she turned away and went back to the wagon.

Boyce had built a fire, and he sat in front of it, mulling some wine in a copper pot, adding spices from time to time. He smiled his new smile for Gray Alys when she looked at him. "The wind is cold," he said. "I thought a hot drink would make our meal more pleasant."

Gray Alys glanced away toward the setting sun, then back at Boyce. "This is not the time or the place for pleasure, Boyce. Dusk is all but upon us, and soon the full moon shall rise."

"Yes," said Boyce. He ladled some of the hot wine into his cup, and tried a swallow. "No need to rush off hunting, though," he said, smiling lazily. "The wolf will come to us. Our scent will carry far in this wind, in this emptiness, and the smell of fresh meat will bring him running."

Gray Alys said nothing. She turned away from him and climbed the three wooden steps that led up to the interior of her wagon. Inside she lit a brazier carefully, and watched the light shift and flicker against the weathered gray wallboards and the pile of furs on which she slept. When the light had grown

steady, Gray Alys slid back a wall panel, and stared at the long row of tattered garments that hung on pegs within the narrow closet. Cloaks and capes and billowing loose shirts, strangely cut gowns and suits that clung like a second skin from head to toe, leather and fur and feathers. She hesitated briefly, then reached in and chose a great cloak made of a thousand long silver feathers, each one tipped delicately with black. Removing her simple cloth cloak, Gray Alys fastened the flowing feathered garment at her neck. When she turned it billowed all about her, and the dead air inside the wagon stirred and briefly seemed alive before the feathers settled and stilled once again. Then Gray Alys bent and opened a huge oaken chest, bound in iron and leather. From within she drew out a small box. Ten rings rested against worn gray felt, each set with a long, curving silver claw instead of a stone. Gray Alys donned them methodically, one ring to each finger, and when she rose and clenched her fists, the claws shone dimly and menacingly in the light from the brazier.

Outside, it was twilight. Boyce had not prepared any food, Gray Alys noted as she took her seat across the fire from where the pale-haired ranger sat quaffing his hot wine.

"A beautiful cloak," Boyce observed amiably.

"Yes," said Gray Alys.

"No cloak will help you when *he* comes, though."

Gray Alys raised her hand, made a fist. The silver claws caught the firelight. Gleamed.

"Ah," said Boyce. "Silver."

"Silver," agreed Gray Alys, lowering her hand.

"Still," Boyce said. "Others have come against him, armed with silver. Silver swords, silver knives, arrows tipped with silver. They are dust now, all those silvered warriors. He gorged himself on their flesh."

Gray Alys shrugged.

Boyce stared at her speculatively for a time, then smiled and went back to his wine. Gray Alys drew her cloak more tightly

about herself to keep out the cold wind. After a while, staring off into the far distance, she saw lights moving against the northern mountains. She remembered the stories that she had seen there, the tales that Boyce had conjured for her from that play of colored shadows. They were grim and terrible stories. In the lost lands, there was no other kind.

At last another light caught her eye. A spreading dimness in the east, wan and ominous. Moonrise.

Gray Alys stared calmly across the dying camp fire. Boyce had begun to change.

She watched his body twist as bone and muscle changed within, watched his pale white hair grow longer and longer, watched his lazy smile turn into a wide red grin that split his face, saw the canines lengthen and the tongue come lolling out, watched the wine cup fall as his hands melted and writhed and became paws. He started to say something once, but no words came out, only a low, coarse snarl of laughter, half-human and half-animal. Then he threw back his head and howled, and he ripped at his clothing until it lay in tatters all about him and he was Boyce no longer. Across the fire from Gray Alys the wolf stood, a great shaggy white beast, half again the size of an ordinary wolf, with a savage red slash of a mouth and glowing scarlet eyes. Gray Alys stared into those eyes as she rose and shook the dust from her feathered cloak. They were knowing eyes, cunning, wise. Inside those eyes she saw a smile, a smile that presumed.

A smile that presumed too much.

The wolf howled once again, a long wild sound that melted into the wind. And then he leapt, straight across the embers of the fire he had built.

Gray Alys threw her arms out, her cloak bunched in her hands, and changed.

Her change was faster than his had been, over almost as soon as it began, but for Gray Alys it lasted an eternity. First there was the strange choking, clinging feeling as the cloak adhered

to her skin, then dizziness and a curious liquid weakness as her muscles began to run and flow and reshape themselves. And finally exhilaration, as the power rushed into her and came coursing through her veins, a wine fiercer and hotter and wilder than the poor stuff Boyce had mulled above their fire.

She beat her vast silvery wings, each pinion tipped with black, and the dust stirred and swirled as she rose up into the moonlight, up to safety high above the white wolf's bound, up and up until the ruins shrunk to insignificance far beneath her. The wind took hold of her, caressed her with trembling icy hands, and she yielded herself to it and soared. Her great wings filled with the dread melody of the lost lands, carrying her higher and higher. Her cruel curving beak opened and closed and opened again, though no sound came forth. She wheeled across the sky, drunken with flight. Her eyes, sharper than any human eyes could be, saw far into the distance, spied out the secrets of every shadow, glimpsed all the dying and half-dead things that stirred and shambled across the barren face of the lost lands. The curtains of light to the north danced before her, a thousand times brighter and more gorgeous than they had been before, when she had only the dim eyes of the little thing called Gray Alys to perceive them with. She wanted to fly to them, to soar north and north and north, to cavort among those lights, shredding them into glowing strips with her talons.

She lifted her talons as if in challenge. Long and wickedly curved they were, and razor sharp, and the moonlight flashed along their length, pale upon the silver. And she remembered then, and she wheeled about in a great circle, reluctantly, and turned away from the beckoning lights of the northlands. Her wings beat and beat again, and she began to descend, shrieking down through the night air, plunging toward her prey.

She saw him far beneath her, a pale white shape hurtling away from the wagon, away from the fire, seeking safety in the shadows and the dark places. But there was no safety in the lost

lands. He was strong and untiring, and his long powerful legs carried him forward in a steady swift lope that ate up the miles as if they were nothing. Already he had come a long way from their camp. But fast as he was, she was faster. He was only a wolf, after all, and she was the wind itself.

She descended in a dead silence, cutting through the wind like a knife, silver talons outstretched. But he must have spied her shadow streaking toward him, etched clear by the moonlight, for as she closed he spurted forward wildly, driven by fear. It was useless. He was running full out when she passed above him, raking him with her talons. They cut through fur and twisted flesh like ten bright silver swords, and he broke stride and staggered and went down.

She beat her wings and circled overhead for another pass, and as she did the wolf regained his feet and stared up at her terrible silhouette dark against the moon, his eyes brighter now than ever, turned feverish by fear. He threw back his head and howled a broken bloody howl that cried for mercy.

She had no mercy in her. Down she came, and down, talons drenched with blood, her beak open to rend and tear. The wolf waited for her, and leapt up to meet her dive, snarling, snapping. But he was no match for her.

She slashed at him in passing, evading him easily, opening five more long gashes that quickly welled with blood.

The next time she came around he was too weak to run, too weak to rise against her. But he watched her turn and descend, and his huge shaggy body trembled just before she struck.

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Finally his eyes opened, blurred and weak. He groaned and moved feebly. It was daylight, and he was back in the camp, lying beside the fire. Gray Alys came to him when she heard him stir, knelt, and lifted his head. She held a cup of wine to his lips until he had drunk his fill.

When Boyce lay back again, she could see the wonder in his eyes, the surprise that he still lived. "You knew," he said hoarsely. "You knew . . . what I was."

"Yes," said Gray Alys. She was herself once more; a slender, small, somehow ageless woman with wide gray eyes, clad in faded cloth. The feathered cloak was hung away, the silver claws no longer adorned her fingers.

Boyce tried to sit up, winced at the pain, and settled back onto the blanket she had laid beneath him. "I thought . . . thought I was dead," he said.

"You were close to dead," Gray Alys replied.

"Silver," he said bitterly. "Silver cuts and burns so."

"Yes."

"But you saved me," he said, confused.

"I changed back to myself, and brought you back, and tended you."

Boyce smiled, though it was only a pale ghost of his old smile. "You change at will," he said wonderingly. "Ah, there is a gift I would kill for, Gray Alys!"

She said nothing.

"It was too open here," he said. "I should have taken you elsewhere. If there had been cover . . . buildings, a forest, anything . . . then you should not have had such an easy time with me."

"I have other skins," Gray Alys replied. "A bear, a cat. It would not have mattered."

"Ah," said Boyce. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he forced a twisted smile. "You were beautiful, Gray Alys. I watched you fly for a long time before I realized what it meant and began to run. It was hard to tear my eyes from you. I knew you were the doom of me, but still I could not look away. So beautiful. All smoke and silver, with fire in your eyes. The last time, as I watched you swoop toward me, I was almost glad. Better to perish at the hands of she who is so terrible and

fine, I thought, than by some dirty little swordsman with his sharpened silver stick."

"I am sorry," said Gray Alys.

"No," Boyce said quickly. "It is better that you saved me. I will mend quickly, you will see. Even silver wounds bleed but briefly. Then we will be together."

"You are still weak," Gray Alys told him. "Sleep."

"Yes," said Boyce. He smiled at her, and closed his eyes.

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Hours had passed when Boyce finally woke again. He was much stronger, his wounds all but mended. But when he tried to rise, he could not. He was bound in place, spread-eagled, hands and feet tied securely to stakes driven into the hard gray earth.

Gray Alys watched him make the discovery, heard him cry out in alarm. She came to him, held up his head, and gave him more wine.

When she moved back, his head twisted around wildly, staring at his bonds, and then at her. "What have you done?" he cried.

Gray Alys said nothing.

"Why?" he asked. "I do not understand, Gray Alys. *Why?* You saved me, tended me, and now I am bound."

"You would not like my answer, Boyce."

"The moon!" he said wildly. "You are afraid of what might happen tonight, when I change again." He smiled, pleased to have figured it out. "You are being foolish. I would not harm you, not now, after what has passed between us, after what I know. We belong together, Gray Alys. We are alike, you and I. We have watched the lights together, and I have seen you fly! We must have trust between us! Let me loose."

Gray Alys frowned and sighed and gave no other answer.

Boyce stared at her uncomprehending. "Why?" he asked again. "Untie me, Alys, let me prove the truth of my words. You need not fear me."

"I do not fear you, Boyce," she said sadly.

"Good," he said eagerly. "Then free me, and change with me. Become a great cat tonight, and run beside me, hunt with me. I can lead you to prey you never dreamed of. There is so much we can share. You have felt how it is to change, you know the truth of it, you have tasted the power, the freedom, seen the lights from a beast's eyes, smelled fresh blood, gloried in a kill. You know . . . the freedom . . . the intoxication of it . . . all the . . . you know. . . ."

"I know," Gray Alys acknowledged.

"Then free me! We are meant for each other, you and I. We will live together, love together, hunt together."

Gray Alys shook her head.

"I do not understand," Boyce said. He strained upward wildly at his bonds, and swore, then sunk back again. "Am I hideous? Do you find me evil, unattractive?"

"No."

"Then what?" he said bitterly. "Other women have loved me, have found me handsome. Rich, beautiful ladies, the finest in the land. All of them have wanted me, even when they knew."

"But you have never returned that love, Boyce," she said.

"No," he admitted. "I have loved them after a fashion. I have never betrayed their trust, if that is what you think. I find my prey here, in the lost lands, not from among those who care for me." Boyce felt the weight of Gray Alys' eyes, and continued. "How could I love them more than I did?" he said passionately. "They could know only half of me, only the half that lived in town and loved wine and song and perfumed sheets. The rest of me lived out here, in the lost lands, and knew things that they could never know, poor soft things. I told them so, those who pressed me hard. To join with me wholly they must run and hunt beside me. Like you. Let me go, Gray Alys. Soar for me, watch me run. Hunt with me."

Gray Alys rose and sighed. "I am sorry, Boyce. I would spare you if I could, but what must happen must happen. Had you

died last night, it would have been useless. Dead things have no power. Night and day, black and white, they are weak. All strength derives from the realm between, from twilight, from shadow, from the terrible place between life and death. From the gray, Boyce, from the gray.”

He wrenched at his bonds again, savagely, and began to weep and curse and gnash his teeth. Gray Alys turned away from him and sought out the solitude of her wagon. There she remained for hours, sitting alone in the darkness and listening to Boyce swear and cry out to her with threats and pleadings and professions of love. Gray Alys stayed inside until well after moonrise. She did not want to watch him change, watch his humanity pass from him for the last time.

At last his cries had become howls, bestial and abandoned and full of pain. That was when Gray Alys finally reemerged. The full moon cast a wan pale light over the scene. Bound to the hard ground, the great white wolf writhed and howled and struggled and stared at her out of hungry scarlet eyes.

Gray Alys walked toward him calmly. In her hand was the long silver skinning knife, its blade engraved with fine and graceful runes.

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When he finally stopped struggling, the work went more quickly, but still it was a long and bloody night. She killed him the instant she was done, before the dawn came and changed him and gave him back a human voice to cry his agony. Then Gray Alys hung up the pelt and brought out tools and dug a deep, deep grave in the packed cold earth. She piled stones and broken pieces of masonry on top of it, to protect him from the things that roamed the lost lands, the ghouls and the carrion crows and the other creatures that did not flinch at dead flesh. It took her most of the day to bury him, for the ground was very hard indeed, and even as she worked she knew it was a futile labor.

And when at last the work was done, and dusk had almost come again, she went once more into her wagon, and returned wearing the great cloak of a thousand silver feathers, tipped with black. Then she changed, and flew, and flew, a fierce and tireless flight, bathed in strange lights and wedded to the dark. All night she flew beneath a full and mocking moon, and just before dawn she cried out once, a shrill scream of despair and anguish that rang and keened on the sharp edge of the wind and changed its sound forever.

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Perhaps Jerais was afraid of what she might give him, for he did not return to Gray Alys alone. He brought two other knights with him, a huge man all in white whose shield showed a skull carved out of ice, and another in crimson whose sigil was a burning man. They stood at the door, helmeted and silent, while Jerais approached Gray Alys warily. "Well?" he demanded.

Across her lap was a wolfskin, the pelt of some huge massive beast, all white as mountain snow. Gray Alys rose and offered the skin to Blue Jerais, draping it across his outstretched arm. "Tell the Lady Melange to cut herself, and drip her own blood onto the skin. Do this at moonrise when the moon is full, and then the power will be hers. She need only wear the skin as a cloak, and will the change thereafter. Day or night, full moon or no moon, it makes no matter."

Jerais looked at the heavy white pelt and smiled a hard smile. "A wolfskin, eh? I had not expected that. I thought perhaps a potion, a spell."

"No," said Gray Alys. "The skin of a werewolf."

"A werewolf?" Jerais' mouth twisted curiously, and there was a sparkle in his deep sapphire eyes. "Well, Gray Alys, you have done what the Lady Melange asked, but you have failed me. I did not pay you for success. Return my gem."

"No," said Gray Alys. "I have earned it, Jerais."

"I do not have what I asked for."

"You have what you wanted, and that is what I promised." Her gray eyes met his own without fear. "You thought my failure would help you get what you truly wanted, and that my success would doom you. You were wrong."

Jerais looked amused. "And what do I truly desire?"

"The Lady Melange," said Gray Alys. "You have been one lover among many, but you wanted more. You wanted all. You knew you stood second in her affections. I have changed that. Return to her now, and bring her the thing that she has bought."

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That day there was bitter lamentation in the high keep on the mountain, when Blue Jerais knelt before the Lady Melange and offered her a white wolfskin. But when the screaming and the wailing and the mourning was done, she took the great pale cloak and bled upon it and learned the ways of change. It is not the union she desired, but it is a union nonetheless. So every night she prowls the battlements and the mountainside, and the townsfolk say her howling is wild with grief.

And Blue Jerais, who wed her a month after Gray Alys returned from the lost lands, sits beside a madwoman in the great hall by day, and locks his doors by night in terror of his wife's hot red eyes, and does not hunt anymore, or laugh, or lust.

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You can buy anything you might desire from Gray Alys.

But it is better not to.



THE GENTLEMAN'S HOTEL

Joe R. Lansdale

The *New York Times Book Review* describes **Joe R. Lansdale** as a writer with “a folklorist’s eye for telling detail and a front-porch raconteur’s sense of pace.” Lansdale is the author of thirty novels and over two hundred short stories, articles, and essays. His work has received an Edgar Award, two *New York Times* notable books, seven Bram Stoker Awards, the British Fantasy Award, the Inktop Award, the Herodotus Award for historical fiction, and many others. His novella “Bubba Ho-Tep” was made into a cult movie of the same name. His work has also been filmed for Showtime. His latest novel is *Vanilla Ride*, published by Knopf and Vintage.

“The Gentleman’s Hotel” is a Weird West horror yarn in the grand, two-fisted Lansdale style and features the Reverend Jebediah Mercer, who has appeared in several other tales, including “Dead in the West” and “The Crawling Sky.” On this story’s origin, the author notes, “The werewolf, called the Wolf Man in the Lon Chaney movies I grew up on, was my favorite horror character. I had always wanted to write a werewolf story and greatly enjoyed the opportunity. I particularly liked the idea of welding it to the Western, as well as my Western character, Reverend Mercer.”



A LITTLE DUST DEVIL DANCED in front of the Reverend Jebediah Mercer's horse, twisted up a few leaves in the street, carried them skittering and twisting across the road and through a gap made by a sagging wide door and into an abandoned livery stable. Inside, the tiny windstorm died out suddenly, dropping the leaves it had hoisted to the ground like scales scraped from a fish. Dust from the devil puffed in all directions and joined the dirt on the livery floor.

The Reverend rode his horse to the front of the livery, looked inside. The door groaned on the one hinge that held it, moved slightly in the wind, but remained open. The interior of the livery was well lit from sunlight slicing through cracks in the wall like the edges of sharp weapons. Jebediah saw a blacksmith's anvil, some bellows, a few old, nasty clumps of hay, a pitchfork, and some horse tackle gone green with mold draped over a stall. There were no human footprints in the dirt, but it was littered with all manner of animal prints.

Jebediah dismounted, glanced down the street. Except for an overturned stagecoach near a weathered building that bore a sign that read: GENTLEMAN'S HOTEL, the street was as empty as a wolf's gut in winter. The rest of the buildings looked equally as worn, and one, positioned across the street from the hotel, had burned down, leaving only blackened ruins and a batch of crows that moved about in the wreckage. The only sound was of the wind.

The Reverend thought: Welcome to the town of Falling Rock.

He led his horse inside the livery, looked about. The animal tracks were what you would expect. Possum. Coon. Squirrel. Dog and cat. There were also some large and odd tracks that Jebediah did not recognize. He studied them for a while, gave up on their recognition. But he knew one thing for sure. They

were not human and they were not truly animal tracks. They were something quite different.

This was the place. Any place where evil lurked was his place. For he was God's messenger, that old celestial sonofabitch. Jebediah wished he were free of him, and even thought sometimes that being the devil's assistant might be the better deal. But he had once gotten a glance at hell, and it was well short of appealing. The old bad devil was one of God's own, because God liked hell as much as heaven. It was God's game, heaven and hell, good and evil. That's all it was, a game, and Jebediah despised and feared God because of it. He had been chosen to be God's avenger against evil, and he couldn't give the job back. God didn't work that way. He was mighty mean spirited. He created man, then gave him a choice, but within the choice was a whore's promise. And instead of making it easy for man, as any truly kind spirit might, he allowed evil and sin and hell and the devil to exist and blamed it all on man. God's choice was simple: Do as I say, even if I make it hard on you to do so. It didn't make sense, but that's how it was.

The Reverend tied his horse in one of the stalls, took the pitchfork and moved the old hay about. He found some good hay in the middle of the stack, forked it out, shook the dust from it and tossed it to his horse. It wasn't the best there was, but it would do, along with the grain he carried in a bag on his saddle. While the horse ate, Jebediah put the fork aside, went into the stall and loosened the saddle, slid it off and hung it over the railing. He removed the bridle and reins, briefly interrupting his horse's feed, slung it over the stall, went out and shut the gate. He didn't like leaving his horse here in this bleak, unattended stable, but he had come up on another of life's evils and he had to be about his business. He didn't know the particulars, but he could sense evil. It was the gift, or the curse, that God had given him for his sins. And this sense, this gift, had come alert the minute he had ridden into the ghost town of Falling Rock. His urge was to ride away. But he couldn't. He had to do whatever

it was that needed to be done. But for the moment, he needed to find water for his horse and himself, grain the horse, then find a safe place to bed down. Or as safe a place as possible.

Jebediah walked down the street, and even though it was fall, he felt warm. The air was humid and the wind was hot. He walked until he came to the end of the street, finally walked back toward the Gentleman's Hotel. He paused for a brief look at the overturned stagecoach, then turned and went into the hotel.

He saw immediately from the look of it that it had been a brothel. There was a bar and there was a series of stalls, not too unlike horse stalls. He had seen that sort of thing once before, in a town near Mexico. Women worked the stalls. Once there might have been curtains around the stalls, which would have come to the women's waists. But business would have been done there in each of them, the women hiking up their dresses so that cowboys, at two bits a pop, could clean their pipes and happy up their spirits, be cheered on by their comrades as they rode the whores like bucking horses. Upstairs, in the beds, the finer girls would work, bringing in five Yankee dollars per roll on the sheets.

Jebediah slid in behind the bar, saw that on the lower shelf were all manner of whiskey bottles. He chose one, held it up to the light. It was corked and full. He sat it on the bar and found some beer bottles with pry-up pressure caps. He took a couple of those as well. Clutching it all in his arms, he climbed the stairs. He kicked a few doors open, found a room with a large bed covered in dust. He placed the bottles on a night table, pulled the top blanket back, shook the dust onto the floor. After replacing the blanket, he went to the window and pushed it up. There wasn't much air, and it was warm, but it was welcome in comparison to the still humidity of the room.

The Reverend had found his camp. He sat on the bed and opened one of the beers and took a cautious sip. It was as flat as North Texas. He took it and the other beer, which he didn't bother to open, and tossed them out the window, sent them

breaking and splattering into the dry, dirt street below. He wasn't sure what had possessed him to do such a thing, but now it was done and he felt better for having done it.

He went back to the nightstand, tugged the cork from the whiskey with his teeth. He took a swig. The whiskey was warm both in temperature and spirit, and he could have cleaned his pistols with it, but it did the trick. He felt a comfortable heat in his throat and his stomach, a wave of relaxation soaking into his brain. It wasn't food, and it wasn't water, but it beat nothing in his stomach at all. After a moment, and a few more swigs, the whiskey warmed him from head to toe, set a bit of a fire in his balls.

He sat on the bed and took several sips before returning the cork to the bottle and going downstairs. He went out into the street again, still looking for someplace with water. He glanced at the stagecoach lying on its side, horseless, and noted something he had not noted before. The runner to which the horses would be hooked was dark with blood. Jebediah examined it. Dried gore was all along the runner. And now he noted there were horse hooves, bits of hair, even a gray horse ear and what looked like a strip of skin, lying in the street. Not to mention a hat and a shotgun. There was a smell too. Not just the smell of dried blood, but a kind of wet stink smell in the air. The Reverend was sure the source was not from the blood or the horse remains. It was the stink of evil, and the smell of it made him absently push back his long black coat and touch the revolvers in their holsters.

He heard a moan. It was coming from the stagecoach. Jebediah scampered onto the runner and onto the side of the coach, moved along to the door with its cut-away window, looked down and inside. Lying against the far side door that lay on the ground was a woman. Jebediah reached through the open gap, grabbed the interior latch, swung the door open and climbed inside. He touched the woman's throat. She moved a

little, groaned again. Jebediah turned her face and looked at it. She was a handsome woman with a big, dark bruise on her forehead. Her hair was as red as a campfire. She wore a tight-fitting green dress, some fancy green shoes. She wore a lot of makeup. He lifted her to a sitting position. She fluttered her eyes open, jumped a little.

The Reverend tried to give her a smile, but he was no good at it. "It's okay, lady," he said. "I am here to help."

"Thanks. But I need you to let me lift my ass. I'm sitting on my umbrella."

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Reverend Mercer helped her out of the stagecoach, into the hotel and upstairs. He put her on the bed he had shaken the dust from, gave her a snort of the whiskey, which she took like a trooper. In fact, she took the bottle from him and took a long, deep swig. She slapped the umbrella, which had a loop for her wrist, against the bed.

"Damn, if that don't cut the dust," she said.

The Reverend pulled a chair beside the bed and sat. "What's your name?" he said.

"Mary," she said, disengaging herself from the umbrella, tossing it onto the end of the bed.

"I'm Jebediah. What happened? Where are the stage horses?"

"Eat up," she said. "Them, the driver, and the shotgunner too."

"Eaten?"

Mary nodded.

"Tell me about it."

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"You might be surprised."

And then, after another shot of whiskey, she told it.

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"I'm a working girl, as you may have already noticed. I am late of Austin, Texas, and Miss Mattie Jane's establishment. But

Mattie met a man, got married, sold her place, made a deal with the madam here in Falling Rock for my services, as well as the remaining girls. I was the only one that took her up on the deal. The others spread out across Texas like prairie chickens.

“Must say, I thought there would be more to Falling Rock than this. Thought it would be a sizable town. And maybe it was. I figure whatever got the driver and shotgunner, as well as a whiskey drummer in the coach with me, got most of the town too. Hadn’t been for my umbrella, I’d be dead. I was surprised at how well I was able to protect myself with it.

“We came into town late last night, me ready to start my job here at the Gentleman’s Hotel, ready to buck pussy, when a strange thing occurred. No sooner had the stage entered the town than a shadow, heavy as if it had weight, fell across the place and sort of lay there. You could see the moon, you could see the town, but the shadow flowed between buildings and into the stagecoach. It became hard to breath. It was like trying to suck down flannel instead of air. Then the shadow flowed away and the stage rolled on, stopped in front of the hotel. The stage shook real hard and then I heard a noise. A kind of screech, unlike anything I had ever heard. Then I remembered one of my old johns telling about being in an Indian fight, and that it had been close and hand to hand, and the horses had been wounded, and there had been a fire in a barn that the Indians set, and the horses inside burned alive. He said the horses screamed. Somehow, I knew that was what I was hearing—screaming horses. Except there wasn’t any fire to burn them. But something was scaring them, causing them pain.

“The stagecoach shook and tumbled over. I heard the shotgun go off a couple of times, and next thing I knew the driver and the shotgunner were yelling. The whiskey drummer stuck his head out of the overturned window, jerked it back again. He turned and looked at me. His face, even in the night, was as white as the hairs on an albino’s ass. He pulled a derringer,

then there was a face at the window. I ain't never seen a face like it. I couldn't place it. My mind wouldn't wrap around it.

"The drummer fired his derringer, and the face jerked back, then it filled the window again. An arm, a hairy arm with what looked like hooks on it, snapped through the window and caught the drummer in the face, peeled him from his left ear to the side of his lip. I remember seeing his teeth exposed through a gap in his jaw. Then the hairy, hooked hand had him by the throat. The drummer fought, slamming the derringer into the thing's face, pounding on its hands with the butt of the gun. He was snatched through the window in a spray of blood.

"I didn't know nothing but to grab up my umbrella. It's all I had. Then the face was there again, tugging at the door, about to pull it off, I figured, so I jumped forward and stabbed out with the tip of the umbrella and got the thing in the eye. It let out a horrible howl, moved away. But two more ugly, hairy faces took its place. Yellow eyes glowing, and all those teeth, dripping spit. I'm not brave, but fear drove me to jump at them and stab into them, and I got one of them, and it—he—whatever it was, jumped back and went away.

"I don't think I scared them, I just think they sort of, well, got bored or something. Or more likely . . . full. 'Cause I could hear them prowling around and around the stage, and I could hear other things, snapping sounds, gnawing sounds, a kind of excitement that sounded like miners at a free lunch.

"They climbed up on the stage and looked in the window a few times, and I struck at one of them, missed. The thing almost swatted me with that hairy arm, those big claws, then there was pink light through the window and it went silent outside. I considered coming out, but couldn't. I was too frightened. I was exhausted too. More than I realized. I dreamed I was awake. I had no idea I had fallen asleep until you came. Good thing I dropped my umbrella while I slept, otherwise you would have found it in your ribs, your eye, someplace."

.

Jebediah picked up the umbrella and looked at it. It was ragged and broken in spots, tipped with wood. He touched it with his fingers. Oak. He gave it to her. "The tip is sharp," he said.

"I broke it off some time ago. Never did get another."

"Good thing," Jebediah said. "The broken tip made a good weapon."

Mary looked at the window. "It's growing dark. We need to leave this town."

Jebediah shook his head. "No. I have to be here. But you should leave. I'll even give you my horse to do it."

"I don't know why you have to stay, that's your business, but I won't lie. I'm ready to go. And I'll tell you, I was just lucky. I think the daylight ran them. Had it been earlier in the night, I wouldn't be here right now. I'd be some turd, digested and dropped on a hill somewhere, maybe drawing flies in an alley. I'll take you up on that horse, mister. But I'd like to do it now. And I'm telling you, you damn sure don't need to be here afoot. Or on horseback, or in a stage, or no kind of way. You need to ride on out with me."

"I'll leave when my job is done."

"What job?"

"His job . . . God."

"You some kind of preacher?"

"Some kind."

"Well, sir, that's your business if you say so. I don't pray to God much. He ain't never answered any of my prayers."

"I don't know that he's answered anyone's," the Reverend said.

.

Darkness was edging into the street when Jebediah and Mary left the hotel, began to walk briskly toward the barn. The oppressive humidity was gone, and now there was a chill in the air. By the time they reached the livery and Jebediah had saddled his horse, the night had slipped in smooth and solid.

Outside the livery, leading the horse, the Reverend looked toward the woods that lay beyond the town, saw that they were holding thick shadows between leaves and limbs.

"I'm not going anywhere," Mary said. "I've waited too long. Bad enough it's dark, but me out there without anyone to help, damn if I will. I'd rather stay here till morning. Provided I'm here in the morning."

"You are probably right," Jebediah said. "It wouldn't be good for you to go now. It's best to go back to the hotel."

They started back down the street, Jebediah leading his horse, and as they went, a kind of dark cloud fled out of the woods and covered the quarter moon and fell on the town and came apart, shadows skittering in all directions.

"What in hell is that?" Mary said.

"The mantle of darkness," the Reverend said, and picked up his pace. "It sometimes comes when a place is full of evil."

"It's cold."

"Odd, isn't it? Something from the devil, from the bowels of hell, and it's cold."

"I'm scared," Mary said. "I don't normally scare up easy, but this shit is making my asshole pucker."

"Best not to think about being scared," Jebediah said. "Best to think about survival. Let's get back to the hotel."

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When they got to the hotel it was full of ghosts.

The Reverend tried to lead his horse inside. It pulled at the reins, not wanting to enter.

"Easy, boy," Jebediah said to the horse, stroked its nose, and the horse settled down, slightly. The Reverend continued to soothe the horse as he and Mary watched the ghosts move about. There were many ghosts and they seemed not to notice Jebediah and Mary at all. They were white and thin as clean smoke, but were identifiable shapes of cowboys and whores, and they moved across the floor and into the stalls. Women hiked

their ghostly dresses, and ghostly men dropped their trousers and entered them. The bartender behind the bar walked up and down its length. He reached and took hold of bottles that were not bottles, but shapes of bottles that could be seen through. At a piano a ghostly presence sat, hatless, in striped shirt and suspenders, all of which could be seen through. The ghost moved his hands over the keys but the keys didn't move, but the player seemed to sway as if he heard the music. A few cowboys and whores were dancing about to the lively tune that was heard by them, but not the living.

"My God," Mary said.

"Funny how he always gets mentioned," Jebediah said.

"What?"

"Nothing. Don't fear these. They can't hurt you. Most of them don't even know you're here."

"Most?"

"They are spirits of habit. They do this over and over. It was what they were doing, or wanted to do, before they died. But that one—"

Jebediah pointed to a ghostly but much more distinct shape sitting in a chair against the far wall. He was a stubby cowboy in a big ghostly hat. He was almost solid, but the wall and the furniture could be seen through him. "He knows we're here. He sees us as we see him. He has been here a while. He has begun to accept his death."

At that statement, the ghostly figure Jebediah referred to, rose and crossed the room toward them, walking, but not quite touching the floor.

Mary moved toward the door.

Jebediah grabbed her arm. "Best not. The street will be a far less welcome place shortly, perhaps already. There's more out there than an oppressive cloud."

"Will he hurt us?" Mary asked.

"I don't think so."

The ghost sauntered toward them, and as he neared, he showed a lopsided grin, stopped, stood directly in front of the Reverend. Beside him, Mary shook like a leaf in a high wind. Jebediah's horse tugged at the reins, Jebediah pulled the horse forward slightly, glanced at it. Its visible eye rolled in its head. "Easy, boy," the Reverend said to the horse, then turned to the ghost, said, "Can you speak?"

"I can," said the spirit, and the voice was odd, as if it were climbing up to them from the bottom of a deep, dark well.

"How did you die?"

"Must I answer that?"

"You are bound to answer nothing at all, or anything you wish," Reverend Mercer said. "I have no control over you."

"I want to pass on," the ghost said, "but for some reason, I cannot. I am here alone, because the others, they don't know they're dead. This town, it holds us. But I seem to be the only one that knows what has happened."

"Evil has claimed it," Jebediah said. "When that happens, all manner of things can occur. Not always the same, but always evil. You have decided to embrace the truth, they have not. But in time, they must."

"I'm not evil. I'm just a cowpoke that got dead."

"The evil is what's holding you," the Reverend said.

The cowboy nodded. "Them."

"The hairy ones," Mary said.

"Yes, the hairy ones," the ghost said. "What they did left me in this place. There are other places, places I would like to move to, but I can't, and it's because of them, who they are and what they are."

"It's the way you died," Jebediah said. "You are caught in one of God's little jokes."

The ghost twisted its head to the side like a curious dog.

"What kind of joke?" the cowboy said. "Because I assure you, I don't find it all that funny."

"And, in time, you will find it less and less humorous, and then you will get angry, and then you will react, and your reactions will not be of the best nature."

"I have no intent of haunting anyone," said the ghost.

"Time and frustration turns the spirit dark," Jebediah said. "But I can help you pass on."

"You can?"

"I can."

"Then do it, for Christ's sake."

"The evil must be destroyed."

"Do it."

"I would ask a small favor of you, first."

"Of me?"

"Tell me about this town. What happened to you. If I know about it, I can fight what's here and I can help you pass on. That is my promise."

"Oh, you can't fight what's here. Soon, you and her will be like me."

"Perhaps," Jebediah said.

"I don't like the sound of that," Mary said.

"First things first," Jebediah said. "I don't want to stand here with my horse and my back against the door."

"Understood," said the ghost.

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Jebediah found a big room, a kind of sitting room, and that was where he put his horse, fed it grain that he poured out onto the hardwood floor. Then, as the ghost watched, he pushed a long cabinet across the doorway and pulled the curtains on the window. He and Mary took a seat on a kind of settee that was before the large window with the pulled curtains. There was no light inside, and Jebediah did nothing to find one, though oil lamps stood out from the wall in brass fixtures. They sat in the dark, it being nothing to the ghost. Jebediah's and Mary's eyes adjusted in time, enough to make out shapes, and of course the ghost was forever constant, white and firm.

Once seated, the Reverend pulled both his revolvers and laid them on his thighs. Mary sat tight against him. The ghost took a chair as he might have in real life. He pulled a ghostly chaw from his pocket and put it in his jaw. The room grew darker and the night grew more still.

"There's no taste," the ghost said after a few jaw movements. "It's just the idea of a chaw. It's there, and I can put it in my mouth, but it's like the liquor the bartender serves, it's not really there. Thing that makes me feel a bit better about that is the fact the money I pay him, it ain't there either. Ain't nothing really there but my urges."

"So the bartender knows you're here?" Jebediah said.

"Sometimes. Sometimes not."

"I'm sure it is a misery," Jebediah said. "But now, if I'm to help you, help us. I feel that we are short of time. Already the street is full of the night, and the great shadow lays heavy on the town. I can taste it when I breathe."

"You talk funny."

"I was educated funny."

The ghost nodded. "That shadow comes down on the town before they do. It comes, they are not far behind. When they show up, and that's at the beat of twelve," and with that the ghost nodded toward a big grandfather clock in the near corner of the room, "that's when things get hairy, so to speak."

Jebediah struck a match and leaned it in the direction of the clock. It said seven P.M.

"Then we have some time," Jebediah said, shaking out the match.

"So maybe we can and should get out of town now," Mary said.

The ghost shook its head. "Nope. You don't want to go out there. They don't get serious until midnight, but being out in the street, under that big ole shadow, that ain't the place to be. The things to worry about the most ain't gonna be here for a while, but, still, there's things out there under and in that shadow, and you don't want no part of that. I'm dead, and *I*

don't want no part of it. And besides, time ain't the same here. Take a look at the clock."

Jebediah struck another match, held it up. The clock had moved a full fifteen minutes. Jebediah shook out his match.

"It's messed up," Mary said.

The ghost shook its head.

Jebediah said, "The devil's time is different from mine and yours." Jebediah turned to the ghost. "Do you have some helpful advice for us? I believe we could use any you might possess, and considering your situation, you are bound to have experiences that we do not."

"And if you're lucky," said the ghost, "you'll never have them. Let me tell you, this ain't no dose-y-doe, being dead, being hung up between here and wherever."

The ghost paused for a moment, as if gathering his energies, and in fact, he seemed to become brighter, more solid, and as he did, he leaned forward and told his story.

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"My name was Dolber Gold, but everyone called be Dol when I was alive. Me and all these cowboys and whores once lived in, or worked in, or passed through this town. And this here establishment, which could be called a kind of house of pleasure, a sure enough Gentleman's Hotel, minus the goddamn gentleman, was always packed and full of piano music and dancing, and if you'll pardon me, ma'm, the riding of asses and the drinking of liquor.

"Mine has been ridden plenty," Mary said. "I'm a working girl. So no begging your pardon is necessary."

"I thought as much," Dol said, "and I mean that with no disrespect. My favorite women were always of the loose nature, and I respect the job they do and the pleasure they give. And if I were able, I'd be glad to lay coins down to buck a bit with you."

"Tell your story," the Reverend said.

"The hairy ones," Dol said. "That's your problem."

Dol nodded at the grandfather clock. "Go outside now you'll be covered in a kind of sickness, a feeling that will make you weak. It's them a'comin'. There's bad things in that shadow in the street, but it ain't nothing to what's gonna be here when that clock hits high midnight."

"You've said as much," Jebediah said, throwing a glance at the clock. His eyes had adjusted enough he could make out the fact that the hands had moved again. Another fifteen minutes. There was still time, but it was best to be prepared, and have time to do it. Dol was as chatty as a squirrel, and nowhere near on point.

"Me and some of the boys got liquored up and rode out to the old graveyard for some fun. I didn't have no respect, 'cause I was full of rotgut to the gills. We rode out there with bad intentions. Graveyard there is what used to be for all them folks settled here, but there was graves older than that on top of the hill, lost in amongst the trees. And it was said Conquistadors come through here, gave trouble to the Indians. Story went that they come through this part of East Texas, up the Sabine River, searching for gold. Course, wasn't none. But they searched anyway. These woods, deep as they are now, were deeper then, and there was things in there from times before we know'd about time. Conquistadores began to die out, and the six that was left, they camped hereabouts, and in the night, a hairy one came. Maybe he was an Indian. Who knows? The Indians tell the story. But he was hairy and he came into the center of them and killed the lot of them, tore them up. Their bones were left to rot on the hill. But Indians said them Conquistadores, every full moon, gathered flesh and hair on their bones, and come into camp searching for food and fun killin'. It was said this thing that killed them had passed along a piece of himself to them, making them like him. Wolves that walked like men. Indians finally captured these six and even the original hairy one, who they claimed came from some hole in the ground, came up to

plague man and spread evil. But they captured them somehow, and buried them deep and pinned them to the ground.”

“Pinned them?” Jebediah said.

“Comin’ to that,” Dol said. “So me and my buddies, we thought it might be fun to dig up them old graves. We wasn’t worried about no curse, but we figured there might be something inside them graves worth somethin’, if it was no more than just a look. Armor, maybe. Swords. Might even have been something in there worth a few dollars. Truth is, we didn’t figure there really was no Conquistadores buried there. But, you get bottle-smart when you’ve drunk enough, and we’d drunk enough, and we rode up there and found some old, unmarked mounds at the top of the hill, trees and vines grown up on and around them. There was a big old stick, like a limb, stuck down in one of the mounds. It looked fresh, like it had just been put there.”

“What kind of limb?” Jebediah asked.

“What?”

“What sort of wood was it?”

“Hell, I don’t know. I think it was hickory or something like that.”

“Oak?”

“Could have been,” Dol said. “I ain’t for certain, but I sure wish I could remember, and maybe figure on what kind of trees grew around there and the name of all the plants and birds and such. What is wrong with you fella? Who gives a shit?”

“My guess is it was oak,” the Reverend said. “Like the tip of Mary’s umbrella.”

The ghost just looked at him.

“Never mind,” Jebediah said. “Go on with your story.”

“Tim, he’d brought some shovels and he passed them out, and we started digging. I remember we come to this stick in the ground, a stick carved on with symbols and such, and I pulled it out and tossed it, and, well, drunk like we was, we didn’t last too long. But before we passed out, we did make some progress on one of them mounds, enough to open it. But I don’t remember

much about that. Next thing I knowed, I was on my back looking up at the full moon shining down through the trees. I got up on one elbow, and that's when I seen it. It was the grave we had dug into. There was a hairy arm pushing up out of the ground, and then this long snout sheddin' dirt, and then this thing pulled its way out of the hole and wobbled up there on the edge of the grave. It was about seven feet tall. It was like a wolf, only it had a long snout and ten times the teeth. Them teeth hung out and twisted ever' which way, and tall as it was, it was still bent some, and its paws was tipped out with long, shiny claws. But the eyes, that was the worst. They was as yellow as old custard, except when they rolled, 'cause then they showed a kind of bloody white around them.

"I tried to get up. But I couldn't move at first, drunk and scared like I was, kind of going in and out of being awake. This thing bent over and started digging in the ground, and pretty soon it was tearing at the dirt and tossing it all over the place. It didn't seem to take no time at all before it had dug into a hole and pulled out another stick like that one I pulled, and then up come another of them things, and he went on to do this time and again, and I tried to get up, tried to shake one of my buddies awake, but he wouldn't budge. Got my gun out and shot at it, but it ignored me. It just went on getting them others out of the ground until there were six. Well, even drunk like I was, by this time I knew I wasn't having no dream, and I was scared sober.

"One of them things picked up one of my buddies by the ankle, held him up high and bit into his head, started slurping at the brain. Well, I'll tell you, I was up then and running. I heard one of my buddies scream up there on the hill, then after that I was running so fast through the trees, getting hit in the face by limbs and such, I didn't hear nor notice nothing. It come to me that I might have been better to have grabbed up my horse, but I don't remember if it was even around no more. Good as it was about being trained to stand, I had either forgotten it or it had run off first sight of that thing comin' out of the ground.

"I ran and I ran, thought I was making pretty good time and doing well, then I seen a shadow moving through the woods, and pretty soon it was everywhere. It made me feel sick and weak, like I'd walked into a cloud of poison. Then there was these other shadows that come out of the darker shadow, and they moved, and they changed, took shape. It was them hairy things, kind of wolf like they were. I got my brains back for a moment, started firing my six gun, but it wasn't doing no good. I'd have done about as much good to try and stop them by peeing on them. But I didn't even have that kind of ammunition, having already peed all over myself from being so scared. And I guess, since I've gone this far, got to say I messed myself too. I was so scared my goose bumps had goose bumps.

"I ran and ran, then come to a break in the woods, climbed to the top of a hill, and then I heard them growl, and they was on me. It happened faster than you can skin your foreskin back for a soapin'.

"But they didn't kill me. Not right off. They slapped me around, bit on me some. Finally one of them threw me over its shoulder like I was a sack of taters, carried me off. I tell you, I was one scared cowpoke. Didn't know if they was gonna eat me or stick their peckers in my asshole. What they did was carry me to the woods and they brought me back to where we had been, up the top of the graveyard. As they carried me I tried to take note of things, see where I was goin', thinking maybe if I stayed alert I had a chance. But there wasn't no chance. They got to the graveyard, they threw me down, and one of them stood there with its big paw on my chest, the claws cutting into me like knives, and the others took to digging. Down on their knees, digging like dogs, or wolves, or whatever they was, and soon they had a big hole dug out and they pulled this big run of bones out of the ground, and yanked a long carved stick out of between its forehead, which wasn't nothin' but a skull, and while I'm lookin', I seen the moonlight come down on that head and I seen that hole in the head seal up, then I seen flesh start

to run over them bones, and then I seen it get pink with blood and the chest start to breathe, and then hair started to grow, in patches at first, then finally all over, and when it was thick as wild prairie grass, the thing sat up, and finally stood up. It was a male, that was obvious. Male like all the others, 'cause the thing that let me know they was all male was hanging out for all to see, long as a razor strap, thick as my ankle. And then it looked right at me.

"Well now, this is the ugly part, and I start to almost feel humanly sick when I think about it, even though I'm deader than Custer and his whole outfit. Still feel the fear, dead or not, thinking back on it. This thing, it come at me slow and easy, pulled its lips back on that long old snout and showed me all them teeth, and I went to screamin', just like a little girl who's seen a spider. And boy, that thing liked that. It pulled those lips back even more and spit started dripping off its teeth, and then it crouched like, and finally I realized I was screamin', cause at first I was just doin' it, not knowing I was, you know, and I heard the quality of it, and I thought, well, 'You go to hell, I ain't screamin' another sound.' And I shut my mouth and went quiet and made to go like a man . . . Only, I didn't. It started to move fast then, a funny kind of move, like some of the moves was left out, and then just before it had me its pecker got stiff, like it was gonna do some business, and maybe it was, I thought, and I screamed again. Big and loud and I couldn't stop till it stopped me, its teeth in my throat. I don't remember much after that, but the next thing I knowed I was here in this hotel, and thinkin' I'd dreamed. But I couldn't get nobody to see me. And then gradually, there was more spirits like me, 'cause that cloud come through the street every night, and then them wolves would come. Kind of folded out of the shadows. Caught everyone here eventually. Before they did, they once got trapped in the old hotel across the street. The real hotel. And the folks in the town burned it down. And them things, they come out of there afire, their hair and flesh growing back fast as bullets fly. They went

on a rampage, and then there wasn't no one left in this town but ghosts, like me. They took to eating horses and cats and rats and dogs, whatever stray animal might wander in. After that, there wasn't nothing. And then they kept coming around. Kept waiting for something. More meat, I guess. I don't know why they didn't go off somewhere else, but they didn't. Maybe far as the trees where me and my poor pals found them was as far as they could go, 'cause I know one night I seen the big one up there on the hill, howling at the moon. I figure it was 'cause it was so hungry its stomach thought its throat was cut."

"They're confined to this area," the Reverend said. "The cloud is part of the evil that came out of the graves. They were held there by the sharp ends of the oak. Some evil can't stand oak. And this, obviously, is that evil. Unfortunately, you released them."

"Unless it's hickory," Dol said. "Or some kind of other tree. Ain't nothing says it's oak. I didn't tell you it was oak. I don't remember."

"You have a point," Jebediah said, "but from my experience, I'm betting on oak."

"It's your bet," Dol said.

"I don't understand," Mary said. "It bit you, like he bit them Spaniards so long ago. They become wolves until the Indians killed them . . . Or held them down with the sticks. But you got bit, the others got bit, why ain't you and them wolf-things?"

Dol shook his head. "Ain't got a nugget on that. Nothin'."

"Because," said Jebediah, "the leader, it is one, and they are six, and together they are seven."

"Well now, that clears it right up," Dol said.

"Satan's minions, that's what they are. And there is one directly from Satan, and there are six that it made. That allows seven. They can kill others, but they can only make so many, and seven is their number. If they were vampires, or ghouls, they could make more, but the hairy things, they can only make seven."

"Who made that rule?" Mary said.

"My guess is the gentleman in charge," Jebediah said.

"God?" Dol said.

"He likes his little games," the Reverend said. "They have no rhyme or reason to us, or perhaps to him, but, they are his games and they are real and they affect us all. Seven. That is the number for the hairy ones."

"How do you know that?" Mary asked.

"I've seen more than I would like, read tomes that are not that delightful to read."

"So you seen it, or you read about it?" Mary said.

"In this case, I read about it."

"So you ain't had no practical experience on the matter?" Mary said.

"On this, no. On things like it, yes."

"Well," Mary said, "I hope this is some like them other things, or otherwise, we can bend over now and look up between our legs and piss on ourselves."

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The night grew heavy and the shadow fled through all parts of the town. In the hotel, and in the other buildings, it was nothing more than a dark, cool fog, a malaise that swept over Jebediah and Mary. Jebediah removed the barrier from the setting room door, and as he did, the clock ticked eight-thirty. Dol and the other ghosts returned to what substituted for lives: the limbo of the hotel; the existence of the not quite gone and the not quite present.

Jebediah led his horse out of the sitting room, into the saloon. In there they watched the ghosts for a moment, and then Jebediah took a candle from one of the tables where it was melted to a saucer, broke the saucer free, and put the candle in his pocket. He found two kerosene lamps with kerosene still in them, and gave those to Mary to carry. He and Mary went up the stairs to the hotel room where Jebediah's whiskey resided.

Jebediah led his horse up there with him. The animal was reluctant at first, but then made the stairs easily and finally arrived at the landing, snorting in protest.

When the Reverend looked down on the hotel, the dark fog had lain down on the floor like a black velvet carpet, was slowly seeping out of sight into the wood.

"You don't go far without that horse, do you?" Mary said, causing Jebediah to turn his head and look.

"I'll save him if I can. No use leaving him to be eaten. He's the best horse I ever had. Smart. Brave. Worth more than most humans."

"That may be true, but he just shit on the floor. And it smells like a horse stall now."

"We'll live with it."

They went into the bedroom, Jebediah leading his horse. He let go of the animal and took Mary's umbrella off the bed and pulled out his pocket knife, and began to whittle pieces off of it.

"I'm glad you got a hobby," Mary said. "Me, I'm scared shitless."

"And so am I. Whittling relaxes me. Especially when it has a purpose."

"What purpose?"

"These little shards of oak. For it to affect the wolves, it has to bear some of the wood's insides. Oak itself, that doesn't do it. Shaved oak. Sharpened oak. Anything that takes the husk off and shows the meat of the tree."

"What you gonna do, chase them down and poke them with that little stuff? I don't see you're doing no good."

"I'm going to take these little fragments, and I'm going to make them smaller. Then I'm going to take my bullets, use my pocket knife to noodle a small hole in the tips of the loads. I'm going to put wood fragments in those little holes, then I'm going to take this—"

He produced the candle from his pocket. "I'm going to seal the little wood shaving-stuffed holes with wax. When I shoot these guns, the oak goes into the wolves along with the bullets."

"Ain't you the smart one?" Mary said, and she took a swig from Jebediah's bottle.

He took it from her. "No more. We had best have our wits about us."

Mary said, "You want, you could knock you off a piece. No charge."

"I would hardly have my wits about me doing that, now would I?"

"Reckon not. Just a friendly offer."

"And a fine one. But I fear I'll have to pass."

The Reverend went back to whittling, but not before he waved a match under the bottom of the candle and stuck it up on the nightstand and lit the wick. When he finished whittling, the wax was soft. He went to work inserting the miniature wood shavings, sealing them with wax. Mary helped.

Howls came down from the piney hills and filled the streets and filled the Gentleman's Hotel.

"They're coming," Jebediah said.

.

Jebediah went out on the landing, looked down. The ghosts had gone, except Dol, and he had wandered behind the bar and lain down flat on the floor. The wolves couldn't hurt him, but Jebediah assumed he didn't want to see them. Dead or not, the cowpoke still knew fear. Jebediah watched his silent, still white figure for a while, then returned to the room and closed the door. He hefted the revolvers in their holsters. They were packing his special prepared bullets. He had done the same for his Winchester ammunition. And he had done it for his gun belt reloads until the wax ran out. The umbrella he had whittled on was little more now than a thin, sharp stick, as Jebediah had torn off the umbrella itself and worked on the shaft with his knife.

Mary sat in the center of the bed. He had given her the rifle.

She said, "You know, I can't hit the back end of an elephant with a tossed shot glass."

"Wait until they're close."

"Jesus," Mary said.

"He'll be of no help," the Reverend said. "Put your faith in that Winchester."

"Maybe they won't know we're here," Mary said.

"They'll know. They're hungry. They can smell us."

The sound of Mary swallowing was as loud as a cough.

.

The Reverend sat in a chair by the window and watched Mary, who had fallen asleep. He was surprised she could sleep. Every nerve in his body was crawling. He lit one of the lanterns and put it on the floor by his chair, then sat back down, took out his pocket watch. He popped the metal cover and looked at it. Even as he watched the hands crawled from eight-thirty to nine. He took a breath, shut his eyes, looked again. It had already moved five minutes past. He went to the window and looked out. Something moved across the street, through the low-hanging shadow that had mostly seeped into the ground, like a dark oil of evil. Jebediah had gotten only a glance, but it was something big and hairy, and it had moved from the far side of the street to the back of the hotel. His horse stirred in the corner of the room, where it had taken up residence by backing its ass against the wall.

Jebediah took a breath and moved away from the window. He went over and stroked the horse's nose, then went to the door, opened it, stepped out on the landing.

It was dead dark down there and he couldn't see a thing. Not even Dol lying behind the bar; perhaps he had gone wherever the others had gone, some other part of the town, all scrunched up and wadded together in a mass of white mist in a closet somewhere. He could see that the door to the hotel was partially opened. When they had come into the hotel, he had closed it.

The Reverend stood there for a long time, one hand on the rail, looking down. Gradually his eyes became somewhat more adjusted. He thought he saw something moving near the bar.

There was a shape.

It was still.

Perhaps it was nothing.

All right, Jebediah thought, it's not like they don't know we're here. He took a small bible from the inside of his coat pocket and tore off the front page and took out a wooden match, struck it, lit the paper and dropped it.

In the falling light of the paper, which lasted briefly, he saw the shape was not just a shadow, but was in fact a thing. Dark fur was glimpsed, hot yellow eyes, teeth, and then the beast was moving, darting around the bar, heading for the stairs, climbing two or three steps at a bound. In that brief moment, Jebediah saw that there was another in the corner. A large beast with even larger yellow eyes. That would be the King Wolf, he thought, the one who would command the others, the one who would send them on their missions.

Jebediah stepped to the mouth of the stairway and pulled his revolver, pointed it casually and comfortably at the shape that was bounding up the stairs, its chest covered in a metal Spanish breastplate. In the darkness he could only tell it was there, couldn't make out features, could catch glimpses of that breastplate by the thin moonlight that came through the hotel windows. He aimed a little low, toward the groin, so that when he pulled the trigger on the Colt .45 it bucked and rode up, throwing the bullet into the upper part of the thing's body, clanging the armor, but traveling through it. The beast grunted, twisted slightly, kept coming. White smoke twisted up from its breastplate where the bullet had gone in, and from its back where it had come out.

Jebediah cocked back the hammer again, thought, my God, I hit it straight on. A .45 slug should have knocked it down the stairs and on its ass, flat, breastplate or no breastplate.

The Colt jumped again, a burst of red flame coughed from the barrel, the bullet struck the beast in the face just as it reached the top of the stairs and was within six inches of the Reverend's gun barrel. There was a barking sound. The beast twisted and

slammed against the wall and rolled down the stairs, smashed through the railing, bounced onto the bar, and lay silent and dark in the shadows.

One, thought Jebediah.

He looked down into the shadows, but couldn't really make out much. He thought he still saw the shape lying there, but he wasn't sure. He glanced toward the corner of the room. The King Wolf moved. And it was like Dol said. It seemed to move with some of the moves torn out. One moment it was in the corner, the next it was consumed by shadows.

Okay. One down. Maybe.

He squinted and looked again. He couldn't be sure what was down there. He had hit it solid, and with the oak in the bullet, so he thought perhaps he had done the old boy in.

The front door of the hotel burst open wider and in came four hairy black shapes, moving so fast it was hard to realize at first what they were. They leaped about, two hitting the stairs and coming up fast, another striking the wall, moving along the side of it, scuttling there with its claws like a giant, hairy roach. The fourth was running on all fours up the railing.

Jebediah shot at the one on the railing, hit it in the head and saw it fall, but now the others were coming at top speed. Jebediah felt his nerves grow taught, about to snap.

Red flames and a loud bark came from his left and one of the wolves on the stairway fell and hit the other and they both went tumbling through the already damaged railing. One hit the floor and didn't move, the other scrambled, ran in a circle like a frightened dog.

The Reverend glanced left. It was Mary with the rifle. He grabbed her elbow and twisted her and pushed her through the open doorway and into the room and slammed the door even as the beast running alongside the wall—causing plaster and wood to fly every which way from its claws—climbed to the ceiling, turned upside down, and scuttled across that. They

heard the creature drop to the floor outside the doorway, heard its breathing, loud as the pumping of blacksmith's bellows.

Then it hit the door, knocking a large gap in it. But as it did it screeched and drew back its paw. There was a roar and the sound of something clambering wildly on the landing.

Inside the room, the horse reared and came down hard on the floor with its hooves. Jebediah feared he had made a mistake bringing the horse up there with them. It could do as much damage to them as the wolves if it became frightened.

Well, maybe not that much.

Mary stood staring at the gap in the door. "What happened?"

"The door is oak. It snagged an arm on it, a sharp piece of wood."

"Then they can't come through?"

"I think they can, just not easily."

"Did I kill the one I shot?"

"I don't know. I think the bullet still has to strike a vital organ, and if it does, the oak splinter in it should act like poison. But maybe it has got to be solid hit. Not just a leg, a shoulder. But the heart. The brain. Liver. Something like that. Looked to me you had a good shot, right in the head. But it was dark. It happened so fast . . . I can't say for sure."

The Reverend went over and took his horse's reins and pulled at them gently and stroked the horse's nose. Its eyes rolled wildly and it lifted its nose and dropped it back down, repeated the motion numerous times. Slowly the horse calmed.

Jebediah and Mary stood for a while, then sat on the edge of the bed, facing the door, guns in hand.

Nothing.

The night crawled on.

Mary said: "It couldn't have been midnight. Not already. My God, did you see those things?"

Jebediah took out his watch, looked at it in the lantern glow. The hands indicated two A.M.

"I thought it was just after nine," he said. "Advantage to this limbo time is that it will be day soon, and then time will slow. They don't come out in the day."

"You know that for a fact?"

"No," Jebediah said. "I don't."

.

They had sat for only a moment when they heard a kind of scratching sound, coming from the street. Jebediah went to the window to look out, saw nothing. But the sound increased. He leaned against the window glass and looked down. Something was coming up the side of the wall. He opened the window quickly, stuck his head out. A wolf was scratching its way up, moving fast, its head lifted to look up at Jebediah. It was almost on him.

Jebediah grabbed up the lantern, flung it out the window and down on the wolf. Flames burst in all directions and rose up on the thing's head like a dunce hat of flame, whipped about and caught the fur on fire. The beast let go with its front paws, slapped at the flames, held itself out from the side of the building with its back claws, then lost purchase—first one foot came loose, then the other—and it fell. It dropped in a twist of fire, hit the ground on its back, rolled on its belly. The flames licked down and along its spine and it screeched and crawled along the street, then went still in the middle of it. The flames lapped its fur clean and cooked the charred meat and the meat fell off in puddles, then there were only the bones, blackened and smoking. The eye sockets in the thick wolf skull chugged out wafts of dark smoke that rose up to the sky and made little black, dissipating mushroom shapes. The skull shifted and cracked and fell apart. Jebediah blinked. It was the skeleton of a man now. The wolf bones had twisted and changed.

Jebediah, trembling slightly, pulled his head in. "They don't like fire," he said. "That and oak splinters. Make a note."

Mary had moved to the window to stand beside him. She

looked down at the bones in the street. "Noted," she said, but the word sounded as if she were clearing her throat.

.

The Reverend reloaded his six gun. "If I got one with a shot, and you got one, and now there's this dead one in the street, we've done all right so far."

"If? So we either have four left, or six," Mary said.

"That sounds about right," Jebediah said. "And we haven't even seen the big boy, the pack leader. Least not well. It might be a whole different kettle of fish. One thing is for sure, it lets its dogs do the dirty work."

"What time is it?"

Jebediah looked. "Damn," he said.

"What?"

"The watch. It's moving backwards. It's midnight again."

.

The Reverend thought: If we can last until morning, it won't matter if we stop them all. Perhaps then I can catch them where they sleep, someplace dark and well hidden, most likely. But if I can get them now, I can be sure, I won't have to search for them. Of course, there's the problem of time. It moves forward and backward. It could do that until we are hunted down, eaten, shat out brown and greasy on a distant hill.

He walked up and down the floor, stopping now and then to sooth the horse that now he wished he had not bothered with. Yet the thought of leaving a fine animal to the monsters, that wasn't good, couldn't do that. Even God, the old sonofabitch, might appreciate a good horse.

He paced and he thought and he felt his nerves twist around inside of him, his feelings and impressions coming fast like rifle shots, jumping from one thought to another. Mary was sitting dead center in the bed, the rifle across her knees, watching the split in the door, turning her head now and then to look behind

her, toward the open window, out into the night, which seemed to have gone more dark and bleak than before, leaving only thin silver moonlight.

Jebediah went to the window and looked out. The bones were still there.

He walked across the room, trying to make himself sit and rest. But he couldn't do it, felt like he had drank two or three pots of coffee. Shit. Coffee. That would be good right now. Some bacon and eggs. Hell, he was hungry enough to eat the ass out of a menstruating mule.

What was that? A flutter?

A moth beat at the window.

Okay. A moth. No problem there. It moved beneath the window and through the gap where Jebediah had opened it to drop one of the lanterns. The remaining lantern hung from a hook in the ceiling and bled pollen-yellow light all over the place.

Jebediah watched the moth. It was a big one and fuzzy and dark of wing. It flew into the room over the bed, up against the ceiling where it flittered about, the lantern light causing its shadow to flick and swell and flap along the wall. Jebediah turned to look at the shadow and the shadow seemed larger than before. Jebediah felt something move on the back of his neck, like prickly pear needles. It was his hair, standing on end. He turned to look at the moth again, up there on the ceiling, and it was a wolf; it had shifted shape. It clung upside down over the bed and Mary. Jebediah wheeled, cross-drew pistols, and fired rapidly. One. Two. Three.

Mary was moving then, off the bed, running across the floor.

The wolf dropped, hit the bed, blew slats and frame in all directions, tossing fur and flesh, scattering dry bones. Then the door was hit, and Jebediah caught a glimpse of a big yellow eye through the rent in the wood. He jerked off a shot. Mary wheeled toward the door, fired and cocked the rifle and fired and cocked the rifle and fired again, banging holes through the

door. Outside the door came a noise like someone sticking a hot branding iron up a bull's ass.

The horse ran around the room, nearly knocking Jebediah and Mary over. The door banged. Another bang, louder this time, and the frame cracked and the door came flying. Two of the wolves bounded in.

The horse went wild. It reared. It slammed its hooves down on one of the wolves. The beast was driven beneath it. It latched its teeth into the horse's belly. The horse bolted toward the door, clattered through it, dragging the wolf beneath it as it went. Jebediah could hear his mount clattering down the stairs, then there was a breaking sound, and Jebediah knew the horse had lost its step and gone through the railing. He could hear a cracking sound as it fell, the horrible noise of a horse screaming.

He didn't have time to consider it. The other wolf was there. The revolvers bucked in his hands and the wolf took two shots in the teeth and the teeth flew like piano ivory. Mary, who had dropped to her knees, was cocking and firing with amazing accuracy, hitting the staggering beast with shot after shot in the chest. One went low and took off its balls. The wolf fell backwards, skidded, hit the wall, slammed up against it in a sitting position. Immediately it transformed. Its characteristics changed. The snout dove back into its face. The ears shrunk. Hair dropped off. A moment later where the odd version of a wolf had been was a naked Conquistador. Flesh fell off its frame like greasy bacon and its bones clattered to the floor like a handful of dice.

They waited.

They breathed.

They continued to look toward the gaping doorway.

Nothing.

Just silence.

After a long time Jebediah picked up the lantern and carried it out on the landing, pistol at the ready. Nothing jumped him.

He walked to the railing and dangled the lantern over it and looked down. His horse lay dead with its back broken across the bar. The wolf was not visible. Without fire or oak splinters, it had survived the fall.

He waved the lantern around, saw the bones of two other wolves—the ones he and Mary had shot on the stairway. All right, he thought, that's good. One in the street. Two in the room. And two out here. That's five. Two left. One of them the big guy.

Jebediah saw movement. Something white. Or gray. It was Dol. He was gliding up the stairs.

"Why are you hiding?" Jebediah said. "They can't hurt you now."

"It's a habit," Dol said, more or less standing on the landing beside Jebediah. "I still think they can hurt me, even though I know they can't. There ain't no reason to it, but that's the way it is."

"So why did you come out now?"

"To tell you the big fella's coming. I can sense it. And it's mad. It ain't got but one wolf left. Thing is, it can make five others. That means you and her and two more. Least that's the way I see it from what you've told me. Long as there's six it can't make no more. But now for fresh meat. Fresh wolves. Put a gun in your mouth. Don't let it take you like it did them Conquistadores. You did them a favor. But don't let the big boy or the last wolf have you. You won't like it."

"Thanks for the warning," Jebediah said. "So there are just the two? We got the others?"

"Yep." Dol lifted his ghostly hat, slid past Jebediah across the floor and melted into the wall.

Jebediah turned to see Mary in the doorway with the rifle.

"Dol," he said.

"I heard," she said. "Jeb?"

"Yeah," he said, as the two of them moved back inside the room.

"Looks like I ain't gonna make it . . . Shoot me."

"We'll make it."

"Promise. You'll shoot me."

"We'll make it."

"Promise."

"It looks bad, you got my word."

"And if I can, I'll do the same for you."

"Well, just do not be in any hurry. I am in no rush. Make damn sure the end is nigh."

.

No sooner had they ceased speaking than they heard steps on the stairs. The lantern light gave the room a soft glow. A cool wind came through the open window and blew against their backs. The Reverend said, "Your turn, watch the window. See a moth, a bird, a bat—if you can hit it, shoot it."

"I can't hit it," she said. "I have to be standing right in front of it to hit it."

"You've done well enough tonight."

"Once with luck, once because no one could miss, not even a blind man."

"Well, if it's small, swat it."

They went silent again. Boards creaked on the landing.

Jebediah wiped his hand on his coat, took hold of his revolver again. Then he did the same with the other hand. He pointed both revolvers in the direction of the door.

A slat of darkness fell into the room, but Jebediah couldn't see its source in the hall. The shadowy slat began to move, a kind of oily thing that took shape, flowed over the floor, rose up large and solid.

It was a wolf-thing with bared teeth. The Reverend had been so amazed, he had done nothing, and now the wolf was on him. It came at him so hard it knocked him across the room, to the window, forcing him through the opening.

He fell. A boot caught on the window frame. The wolf leaned way out and grabbed him, pulled him up by his pants legs. Its mouth opened so wide Jebediah felt as if he could see all the way to hell. Its breath was every dead thing and rotten thing that had ever existed. It was about to bite him in the crotch.

Mary's rifle cracked two times and the wolf let him go. Jebediah fell, twisting to land on his back with a white puff of dust. He hit so hard the breath was knocked out of him and he fell unconscious.

When he awoke, he realized he had only been out for moments. He could hear screaming in the room upstairs. He moved, and it hurt to do so. His back felt as if it were on fire. He eased to a sitting position and tried flexing his legs. They still worked. All of him worked. His head ached as if he had been on a ten-day drunk.

He found his revolvers in the dust. Started back toward the hotel.

The screaming stopped with a loud shot. Jebediah looked up. The wolf-thing was at the window now, its snout dripping blood. It crawled out the window and scuttled down the side of the hotel toward Jebediah.

The Reverend opened fire. Hit the beast in the head the moment it dropped to the ground, a good shot just above the left eye.

The thing charged him. Jebediah dropped the revolvers and grabbed at the wolf's shoulders, pushing away its head, its snapping teeth. He fell back, placing his boot in the creature's stomach, kicked up, launching the wolf.

When Jebediah whirled to his feet and snatched up the revolvers, the wolf lay in the dirt. Not moving. Jebediah realized his shots had been well placed, if slow in having effect.

The wolf lost fur, changed shape, shifted back to a naked Conquistador. The flesh fell off, and instantly it was nothing but bones scattered in the street.

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When Jebediah had reloaded his revolvers, he walked around to the front door of the hotel, stood for a moment in the street. The door to the hotel was still wide open. He eased inside, pistols at the ready. He thought about Mary, took a deep breath, started up the stairs. Every step he took made a squeak. He thought he saw a shadow move on the landing. He squinted, saw nothing solid. But the wallpaper appeared darkly stained in one spot, and he had a feeling that his huckleberry was there, part of the shadows, part of the wallpaper.

Easing on up, he paused, turned his head like a curious dog. The spot on the wall moved, and as it did it swelled. It was the great wolf, easily eight feet tall. It clacked its claws as it walked. It bent slightly at the waist and stood at the top of the stairs.

"Could not wait, could you?" the Reverend said. "Too impatient."

The King Wolf's ears flicked, its tongue came out of its mouth and licked at the air and lapped across its own snout.

"You are not tasting me yet," Jebediah said.

And then the King Wolf bent forward and came down on its front paws in a dive, came down the stairs at a run. The Reverend's pistols barked, once each, and then the King Wolf hit him and he went tumbling backwards, step by step, landing at the base of the stairs.

He looked up. Smoke was twisting out of the King Wolf's body where the bullets had struck and it seemed frozen on the stairs, and he could see the creature better. It was unlike the others. Not only bigger, but there was a peculiar countenance about the horror that made Jebediah feel as if he were in the presence of Satan himself.

And unlike the others, the bullets had done damage, but the King Wolf had been able to take it. Jebediah got to his feet in a kind of shuffle, backed toward the door, the pistols held before

him, his back aching, his side on fire. So far he had fallen out of a window and been knocked down a flight of stairs and he could still walk, so he felt he was doing well enough. And he hadn't even added in the werewolves.

When he was in the street, the doorway of the Gentleman's Hotel filled with the King Wolf's shape. It stood on its hind legs and its cock and balls swung about when it moved as if they were a clockwork mechanism. It bent its head to accommodate the doorway and moved out into the street, its teeth dripped saliva in thick strings.

"Guess it's you and me, Mr. Wolf. I know your boss. Both of them. One high, one low. I have not got such a great opinion of either."

The King Wolf charged off the hotel porch and into the street on its hind legs. Jebediah fired with his revolvers, two shots, and though the shots had effect, they didn't stop the beast.

Jebediah bolted and ran. He felt pain in every muscle, but fear of what was about to happen was stronger than pain. He ran. He ran fast. He was nearly to the overturned stagecoach when he looked back to find that the King Wolf was loping along rapidly, closing the gap. He could feel its burning breath on the back of his neck.

The Reverend jumped up on the stage, dove through the open side window, dropped down inside. The King Wolf's face dunked into the open space and it let out with a wild howl that shook Jebediah's already tormented insides.

Jebediah let loose with both revolvers. Firing twice.

King Wolf jerked back. Jebediah quickly began to reload. He had three bullets in one revolver when the thing showed itself again. Jebediah fired a shot that hit the King Wolf solid in the forehead, made a hole, and smoke twisted up from the hole, but the beast took the shot and didn't pull back. It stuck an arm through, caught Jebediah by the ankle, jerked him up and out of the stage window, banging his head and causing him to drop one of his revolvers as he was pulled free.

King Wolf held the Reverend high above the ground with one hand, its face easing closer toward him. Slowly. Making the triumphant moment last. The King Wolf's mouth opened wide.

Jebediah jerked up the loaded revolver he still clutched in his fists, and fired his last shots straight into the King Wolf's open mouth.

King Wolf snapped its mouth shut. Smoke came out of its nostrils. It stepped back a step. It opened its mouth so wide Jebediah could hear the bones in its jaws pop. And then the King Wolf dropped Jebediah on his head. The Reverend rolled and came up with the empty revolver. He supported himself on one knee, began reloading, glad he still had some wax and wood shaving shells left, not happy that it seemed to be taking him forever to fumble the bullets into the gun. He glanced up fearfully as he loaded. The King Wolf was stepping backwards, slowly. Then it paused, its head tilted . . . and fell off, splatting heavily into the street, rolling over and over, losing hair, showing nothing but a skull, white as purity.

The rest of the torso fell over.

Finally, thought Jebediah, the accumulated bullets, the shavings, have done their duty.

The great cold shadow rose out of the ground and filled the street. Reverend Mercer stood. The shadow rose thick and to the height of his neck, then the shadow fled, and with its passing came a cool wind, and when the wind was gone, there was nothing in the street, not even the shadow, which was melting into the tree line at the far end of the town.

The King Wolf was gone. There was only a twist of fur flying by. It clung to his cheek for a moment, then was blown away.

Out of the hotel came the white wraiths that had hidden there, among them the more solid Dol. All of the spirits rose up toward the sky, toward the stars, gathered into a fluffy white formation that fled upward to join the Milky Way. In a moment they were all gone and the stars in the sky winked out like snuffed candles. The sun rose as if out of the ground and took a

position at high noon immediately. The sky turned blue. White clouds boiled across it quickly, and then stopped, looking like mounds of mashed potatoes on a shiny blue china plate.

Jebediah turned his head toward a sound.

Birds chirping in a tree on the edge of the north end of the street. Brightly colored birds so thick that at first Jebediah thought they were fall leaves gone red and yellow and blue and golden. The birds made a sudden burst to the sky, as if confetti had been tossed, and the sunlight behind them made them look strange and otherworldly.

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In the hotel room the Reverend found Mary. She lay on the floor. She had the rifle under her chin. She had managed to pull the trigger, shooting herself. He could see why. She had been bit all over. Maybe she had been in time.

He took her body out to the street, then brought the mattress out. He broke up chairs from the hotel and made a bonfire and got it started and put the mattress on that, put Mary's body on top of the mattress. He leaned against the stagecoach and watched her burn. When there was nothing left, he went up the hill to the trees where Dol had said the graveyard was. He saw it and walked among it, went up the hill and into the deeper trees where he found gutted graves. The wolves' graves. He used his pocket knife to shave off pieces of oak, and he made crosses from them, tying them together with strips of cloth from his shirt. One cross for each grave. Just in case. He tore pages out of his bible and put those in the graves with them. Another just in case.

He went back to the hotel and got his saddle and saddlebags off his dead horse, threw them over his shoulder, went out into the street and started walking south.

A crow followed, flying just above him, casting a shadow.



FULL MOON HEARTH

Barb Hendee

Barb Hendee is the author of the popular Vampire Memories series, which includes the novels *Blood Memories* and *Hunting Memories*. She is co-author with her husband, JC, of the nationally best-selling Noble Dead dark fantasy saga, which started with 2003's *Dhampir* and has, with the release of *Through Stone and Sea* in 2010, reached eight volumes. Her short fiction has appeared in such magazines as *Cemetery Dance*, *Talebones*, *Midnight Zoo*, and *Deathrealm* and the anthologies *Young Blood*, *Ghosttide*, *The Darkest Thirst*, *Realms of Infamy*, and *The Year's Best Horror Stories: XX*. She lives just south of Portland, Oregon.

On the origin of "Full Moon Hearth," Hendee explains, "I was in grad school when I wrote that piece. We were helping another grad student get settled into this tiny rental house out in the middle of the forests of Deary, Idaho. Wow, is that place isolated. I started thinking that anyone could just disappear out there and never be found—if they were so inclined—and then I thought 'even a werewolf.' The next day I started work on the story."



I REMEMBER STANDING in the middle of our old fir trees that summer, breathing in the warm evening air and wishing dusk would go on forever. There was a lily-checked frog pond behind our house, and I loved to lean against a tree, listen to the frogs' songs, and think about my day as the sun went down.

I heard Raymond's booted feet coming down the path, but I gazed out at the fading light and pretended not to.

"Lisa," his voice sounded behind me. "Come on. It's getting late."

Unable to remain deaf, I turned to meet him—his face tense, his overalls dusty from the new set of shelves he'd been sanding for the Shermans.

"Sorry," I whispered. "I'm coming."

Tonight was just another full moon. Somehow, I figured that as time passed and I grew up, it wouldn't bother me so much. But I was seventeen, and Raymond was twenty-eight, and these nights never seemed to get any easier. We never seemed to feel any different.

The songs of frogs and crickets brought little comfort, and I felt guilty because Raymond had had to come looking for me. A tiny piece of me wanted to hold his hand, but I didn't. He wouldn't want to be touched until tomorrow morning.

"You keep the door locked," he whispered, "and don't open it for nobody."

"You say the same thing every month. Don't I always lock it?"

We reached the cabin, and I felt the same odd longing to touch him. His face melted into a tight mask of pain and fear. A thin trickle of sweat slid down his forehead as he backed away.

"Just keep it locked. I'll see you in the morning."

"Is it bad?" Some nights were worse than others.

"Yeah. It's gonna be bad this time. Get in the house."

Without watching him leave, I slipped into the cabin, secured the deadbolt, and dropped a two-by-four into metal brackets that made the front door impassable from the outside. Ray had started the evening fire as usual, but I hadn't cooked any supper. He never ate on wolf-nights; it made him nauseous. I went into the kitchen to hunt up some bread and cheese.

We called this place "a cabin," but it was really just a fixed-up shack—not a dump. The inside had a comfortable, rustic look. Raymond was the best carpenter in Latah County, and his talents had salvaged our poor, old house.

I peered out the window. The darkening forest lay empty. Once, when I was little, I told him that the growling and sniffing sounds at dusk frightened me. His face had gone white, and he'd made it a fanatical habit to get as far from the house as possible before changing.

These nights were lonely. Good thing they only happened once or twice a month. I took my cold dinner back to Ray's rocking chair, covered my legs with an afghan, and stared into yellow, crackling depths of the fire. Abrasive, red brick made the flames seem brighter, and I didn't bother turning any lights on. This place had been my home since the age of seven. We'd run from South Dakota to Idaho ten years earlier, a nightmare ride of silence.

Our father had once been a professor of English literature. I should probably have a better idea of what really happened. But I was so young, and the pictures in my head are hazy.

My mother abandoned us when I was two, and my father consumed enough alcohol to ruin his career. None of that mattered to my welfare though, since Raymond took care of me. He cooked my meals, washed my clothes, and braided my hair. I made my first trip to kindergarten with his hand wrapped around mine. Teachers never called or held conferences with my dad, just with Raymond. It didn't seem strange to me, but like I said, I was only seven when we left.

The wolf-nights started with a hunting trip. Ray and two of his friends saved extra money for a year to drive over to

Montana in October. Since Dad couldn't be trusted to care for me alone, Ray took me to fat Aunt Lily's.

Standing on the porch, I begged him not to leave.

"Just be a week," he said through a feigned smile.

I waited for him quietly. My sense of time was vague, but I do remember crying myself to sleep one night after he'd been gone for what seemed like months. Finally, my aunt sat me on a chair, her dirty face disgusted. She wasn't wearing nylons, and the varicose veins in her legs bulged out like green and purple plums.

"Your brother's had an accident. That's why I've been burdened with you these past weeks."

Weeks? How long was that? But of course I didn't ask. Aunt Lily was a firm believer that children should be rarely seen and never heard.

"He's in a hospital in Montana, but I spoke with him this morning, and he'll be home to get you in few days."

Watching the flab roll down her enormous legs, I gathered my courage and whispered, "What happened to him?"

"He was attacked by some animal in those hills! That's what happened. You can be sure he's gonna pay for the extra food you've eaten too. Don't know why I let myself get talked into this in the first place. Should have let that drunken father of yours own up to his responsibilities."

I started to cry softly, and she sent me to my room. My young, unformed mind pictured wild animals tearing Raymond apart. I couldn't sleep or stop shaking.

A few days later, Aunt Lily's voice rose to the ceiling, shouting curse words that I wasn't supposed to hear, and I ran out to see Ray in her living room. He looked pale and had large white bandages wrapped around his throat and left arm.

"You're home!" I ran to him, knowing that all was right with the world now that he was back. He gave Aunt Lily some money, and we left.

I suppose things were normal from that moment until the first full moon. Waking in the middle of the night, I heard my father's terrified screams. Violent crashing sounds made me pull the covers over my head, and the little night-light Ray had bought for me flickered through the blanket as the walls shook. Growling and roaring echoed through our house, but I lay still as a stone, waiting for Raymond.

When the sounds ceased, I decided to make a run for his bedroom and dashed toward my door. A sickly smell hit me when I reached the hallway, but I kept running. Finding nothing but torn covers on his empty bed, I began crying and stumbled out into the kitchen.

It was red.

The floor, walls, and counters were bright red and what was left of my father's body lay in a heap under the table. The back door had been torn off its hinges. I don't remember any more until the next morning.

"Lisa, grab my neck," Raymond whispered in a hoarse voice. The room was just getting light, but I couldn't seem to wake up. His strong arms lifted me, and the sweat from his body smeared on the side of my face. His breath smelled like vomit.

"Where are we going?"

"Shhh, baby," he murmured. "We gotta go for a drive."

He laid me down on the seat of his dented Chevy pick-up and ran around to driver's side.

I rolled over to pull his hunting jacket off the cab floor. "The kitchen's all red."

He didn't answer me.

So long ago.

By the time I was seventeen my full moon nights passed peacefully, sitting in the rocker, staring at the fire and remembering. The house was always so still, only the clock on the mantle making any sound at all. As usual, I rocked until the fire burned low and then fell asleep in his chair.

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I woke the next morning to the sound of Raymond retching outside my window. Still dressed from the night before, I unbarred the door and ran around to the back of the house.

He was naked, crawling in the dirt, gagging on his own bile.

"Lisa. . . ."

Looking up from the ground in agony, he tried to reach out for me and collapsed into convulsions.

Dropping to my knees, I tilted his head up to make sure his windpipe stayed clear. He'd been right the night before. I hadn't seen him this sick in nearly a year.

"Try and get your arm around me."

He did try, but I had to drag him toward the house. I'm not a frail woman. Ray is 6'2" and my head reaches his chin. Years of stacking wood and carrying water had strengthened my arms.

After pulling him through the front door, I didn't bother taking him to his bed but laid him on the couch. This was a familiar scene—my part well rehearsed.

"It'll be all right. . . ."

I got a towel and bowl of water to wash his face and a bucket for him to throw up in. His body was racking, so I covered him with an afghan for comfort's sake.

"Rinse out your mouth," I murmured, holding a glass of cold water to his lips.

He managed to sip a little and swish it around in his mouth before spitting into the bucket. He lay back and seemed to calm down.

"Better?"

He nodded, but his teeth were still clicking together. Picking up the wet towel, I washed his face and chest. This was the only time we ever touched each other. In his helplessness, he clung to me, not having any other choice.

"Can you breathe? Are the cramps easing?" My questions memorized . . . mechanical.

Managing a nod, he lifted his hands into view. "Is there any blood?"

“No.”

He had an almost pathological fear of hurting something during blackouts and always made me inspect him for blood. Sometimes, I'd wash it away before he gained coherence, and lie to him.

“You're going to be down for a couple of days, Raymond. Should I drive out to the Shermans' and tell them their shelves won't be done till the weekend?”

“Wait till later.” He curled down against a pillow. “Let me get some sleep and see how I feel tonight.”

“Sure. Do you want some tea?”

“No. I'm tired.” He rolled over onto his stomach.

His muscle spasms were growing less frequent, and I knelt down beside him to rub his back.

“The worst is over. Just close your eyes.”

Twenty minutes later he was resting on his own, so I decided to get on with my work. Since we were into late summer, I'd planned to spend the day putting up applesauce.

I changed into an old cotton skirt and sweater, re-wove my hair into a heavy braid, and went out to the barn. We used our barn for odd things since farm animals weren't an option.

Ray had an obsession with firewood. Stacks and stacks of it covered our barn walls. Once in a while, in deep winter, he sold it to townspeople, but not often. In between the wood sat baskets of apples and pears from the orchard, and Ray's workshop was in the very back.

When we first arrived in Idaho, he worked for Mr. Sherman's logging outfit. It was strange luck that brought us to Herald Sherman: a man of large heart and few questions. Our shack belonged to him. When he found out that Raymond had a seven-year-old sister and we were both living in a truck, he brought us to our little home. The rent was supposed to come out of Raymond's wages, but we never saw any change in his paycheck.

The shack had holes in the roof, and our first winter was hard with no insulation and only the fireplace for heat. Raymond

spent the first few weeks frantically reinforcing the shutters and screwing new bolts into the doors. I was too young then to understand why.

After that, he used extra money to buy carpenter's tools: planes, routers, sanders, a lathe, and a good table saw. For some reason, people in small towns feel that homemade anything is better than what you buy in the stores, and within a year, Raymond quit his logging job and went to work as a full time carpenter.

He enrolled me in school, and we lost ourselves in the rustic town of Deary, Idaho. Raymond tracked down and kept a newspaper clipping of our father's death. The coroner's report stated he'd been killed by an animal. We were simply declared missing, and I think the police may even have spent some time looking for us in Dakota.

Ray hadn't killed anyone since then. We lived five miles from town, and the few missing farm animals were chalked up to wolves. I guess that was half right.

But the older Raymond grew, the more reclusive he became, and he didn't allow any other kids to visit our house.

When I was ten, he let me go to a birthday party—against his better judgment—for a girl in my class named Natalie. Two sisters and a set of laughing parents carried in her flaming pink cake while everyone else sang. My shock at their matching furniture and nuclear relationship had been profound.

"How come Natalie has a mother and father and two sisters and we only have each other?" I asked Raymond on the way home.

He didn't answer me, but his jaw twitched, and he never let me go to another party.

As time passed, one of our favorite hobbies became book collecting. Jack London filled the back of my eyelids with dreams, and Raymond escaped in the world of Dick Francis mystery novels. Sharing our adventures became important, so we took turns reading our books aloud by the fire.

One night when I was about fifteen, I finished chapter six of *White Fang*, and his brows knitted. "Why do you keep reading me stories about wolves?"

His question threw me. "I don't know . . . you read me books about race tracks."

"That's different."

"I'm sorry, Ray. I'll get another one."

"No. It's all right. I just wondered why."

My gaze turned to the fire. "The men are all so close to their dogs. Why can't we get a dog?"

"Because I'd kill it."

"You don't know that. You could lock it in the house with me."

"Yeah? And what if it started barking on a full moon night? What if I heard it and tore the house apart trying to get in?"

I sighed. "We could get a kitten?"

He stared at the flames in silence.

"Raymond, everyone has pets. One little kitten isn't going to change anything. Cats are quiet."

Two weeks later, he drove up with a baby lamb in the back of his truck.

"We'll try something in the barn first. Get me some boards and my hammer. I'm going to have to reinforce the doors."

The white animal on the truck bed bleated, and I ran to hold her instead of getting the boards. Her soft wool curled around my fingers like angel hair at Christmas. I wanted to throw my arms around Ray and thank him, but I knew better.

We dubbed the lamb *Topsy* because she fell down a lot. Even Raymond began to like her little presence as she roamed around the dusty yard in an effort to follow him.

We only had her a month.

About one in the morning on the next full moon, I heard snarling while he tore the barn apart, and covered my ears when she began to bleat.

The next morning, I found him sobbing and vomiting on the barn floor. We never found her body, but one cord of wood was covered in an ugly red smatter.

Ray almost never got angry, but he turned his head toward me and managed to yell, "Did you hear it?"

"No," I lied. "It must have been quick, so quick she couldn't have known what happened."

He buried his face in arms and wouldn't look at me.

I blamed myself for having pushed him and never asked for another pet.

I wish it had ended with Topsy's death, but it didn't. He stopped talking and often just sat by the fire in silence. I'd seen him like that before, as depression hit him from time to time. Usually he snapped out of it on his own, but this dark mood went on until I walked in one afternoon and found him staring down the barrel of his .357 Magnum. I didn't know if normal bullets would kill him or not, but blowing his own head off seemed to me like it would do the job.

"Well's going dry," I said, ignoring the gun. "You oughta haul some spring water up in the truck."

He looked at me in a daze, put the gun down, and left. I went to make dinner as the truck started, my chest constricting in panic. Talking wouldn't do any good. Raymond and I never talked about any of it. Our conversations were limited to reality at hand.

I dug under the sink for some potatoes and looked around my cramped kitchen. A fleeting thought struck me. When he came back, I wandered outside to help him unload the buckets.

"How come I'm living with a carpenter and still don't have a decent pantry?"

"Huh?" he kind of grunted in what appeared to be surprise.

"I'm shoving potatoes under the sink. My dish shelves are full of canned tomatoes, and there's no place to keep the flour. Why can't we build a pantry onto the kitchen?"

His face clouded for a moment, and he put the last bucket down. "Well, I might be able to add something behind the back door." This was the first time he'd spoken in days. "I'll take a look," he finished.

The idea caught his interest. He brought home some lumber and paint, and I held measuring tapes and boards for him. By the end of the week, he was whistling again and the gun was back in his bedroom drawer.

Our new addition was actually quite nice compared to the rest of the shack.

"Maybe we should paint the cabin so it all matches," he suggested.

I'd given him a smile for an answer, and we left for town to buy more paint.

Our barn was filled with memories for me, but on that day I planned to make applesauce, it seemed to speak even more than usual about tales of our past. I filled my bucket with large green apples and wandered back to house. Raymond slept quietly for most of the morning, crying out only once in a while with bad dreams.

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On the morning of the next full moon, we got up early to run a few errands. Raymond had agreed to make new cabinets for a local shopkeeper named Charlie Bedford, and we drove into Deary because Charlie'd ordered some special light-toned oak for the job.

As we entered the shop, I spotted Josh and Ruben Trotter. Both were dime store hoods and high school dropouts to boot. I couldn't stand either of them.

"Morning, Charlie," Raymond said. "Came by to pick up the oak."

"Sorry, Ray. It ain't come in yet, but it's due this afternoon. Maybe I could run it by your place tonight?"

I glanced up in alarm. Today would turn into a wolf-night.

Raymond just shook his head. "I'm going out of town for a few days. I'll just pick it up when I get back."

Charlie nodded. "Sure, but I got your down payment here. Better take it before I forget and spend it on something else."

"Thanks." Raymond shoved the bills into his pocket without counting them. "I'll probably see you on Wednesday."

Josh Trotter was watching the whole exchange with poorly hidden interest on his grease-stained face. I wanted to leave.

"Bye, Lisa," he said, smiling sarcastically. "Nice talking to you."

Raymond glared at him, and he shut up.

The September sun shone brightly in the rear view mirror all the way home. Ray was in a good mood for a wolf-night, and he chatted to me about the brass handles he planned to fit for Charlie's cabinets. Almost everyone gave Ray partial payment in advance because he took his time on tiny details and his work was so extraordinary.

He spent the rest of the day chopping firewood for winter, and I weeded out our garden even though all but the squash and pumpkins had been harvested. By dusk, he'd checked the doors and shutters six times.

"After I leave you be sure and—"

"Lock the doors," I finished for him. "I know."

"Just do it."

Perspiration was beginning to run down his hair, and I could tell he was getting dizzy.

"You better go."

"Yeah . . . see you in the morning."

He slipped away, and I felt that familiar empty pang of longing shoot through my stomach. Now I only suffered from worry and loneliness, though. When I was a child, these nights had been a confusing, living hell.

I walked to the window and watched him disappear, hoping he wouldn't lose his clothes this time. Once I suggested he just

get undressed and leave them here, but that idea didn't go over too well.

After cutting up an apple, I made some coffee and went to the rocking chair. No memories came to mind, so I finished my apple and picked up a James Michener novel.

The night wore on, and the fire burned low. I was dozing in my chair when the soft click of an engine shutting off started my eyelids open. No other sound followed, but I moved to the window and peered out through the shutter.

At first the yard looked empty. Then two forms passed close by and I heard voices.

"I told you he was lying. His truck's right there."

"Well, maybe he's got a car we don't know about. You heard him tell old Charlie he wasn't gonna be home tonight. Why would he lie about that?"

"Cause he don't like nobody out here. Look how he treats Lisa. He don't let nobody near her."

"Well, the place looks dead to me. I say we start in the barn. Probably where he keeps his tools and stuff."

Josh and Ruben Trotter.

I didn't know what to do. Raymond's carpentry equipment was about to go for a long ride. Those tools represented years of hard work on his part; they were our livelihood. If I let them be stolen, he'd have to go back to logging again.

Moving quietly into Raymond's bedroom, I pulled the gun from his drawer and made sure it was loaded. The steel felt cold in my hand. If I just stayed in the house, Josh and Ruben would never get past the barricaded door. If they managed to tear a shutter off and break a window, I'd have a clear shot at the first one through.

But I couldn't wait for that. They had to be stopped before leaving the barn. What if they simply took off with Raymond's tools?

I slipped out into cooling night air, dry lawn crunching beneath my feet. The barn door stood open, and they'd been stupid enough to turn the light on.

"God, look at all this stuff. No wonder old man Charlie's paying him so much."

Ruben's voice.

I moved in and pointed the gun toward his sound.

"Don't," I ordered.

He whirled in panic and stared down the barrel. Too late, I realized I hadn't waited long enough to listen for where Josh was. Ruben was an insect. Josh was an animal.

"Lisa!" Ruben gasped. "I wasn't hurting anything. We . . . we . . . you ain't supposed to be here." He was alone.

"Where's Josh?"

"Right here," a voice whispered from behind as a hand shot over my shoulder and grabbed the wrist holding the gun.

I tried to jerk the gun up, but his arms seemed to be all over me, and then the wooden floor rushed up. Before I could even think, he had the barrel in my face.

"Stop it!" he hissed. "Where's your brother?"

"In the house with a shotgun," I spat back.

"Yeah, sure. And he sent you out here alone? I don't think so."

"Why don't you go in and look?"

I was scared. They were going to take everything we had, and Raymond wasn't here to stop them. I tried not to think about what Josh might do to me.

"Leave her alone!" Ruben cried. "He might still be here."

"Shut up."

Josh pulled me to my feet.

"We'll just go see who's in the house," he whispered. "You stay in front of me."

The dust kicked as he dragged me into the front yard. I knew I didn't have much time. Josh was a lowlife, but he wasn't stupid. It would take him about three seconds to figure out that Ray wasn't in the house. The front door kept growing closer. My mind was casting about in desperate directions—like elbowing him in the chest and taking a bullet—when a soft growling sound echoed from the shadows beside the cabin.

A dark form flashed out, impacting with my shoulder. I remember dirt in my hand and Josh's scream.

The porch light gleamed in my eyes as I turned to the struggle beside me. A huge furred form had Josh pinned to the ground. Its heated panting and his gasps pounded in my ears. I watched the horrified realization dawn on Josh's face as it slowly and purposefully put its fanged mouth around his throat and ripped out his jugular, as if it wanted him to know he was going to die. I scrambled away from both of them.

Josh stopped gasping. His head lay at an unnatural angle, a dark stain spreading into the dirt around him. His killer was now staring at me.

I knew who it was and didn't move. For some reason, I expected him to be different from an actual wolf, that he'd be walking upright—half man, half animal. But he wasn't like that. He just looked like an enormous wolf, soft muzzle dripping liquid, amber eyes gone mad.

He turned to worry Josh's dead body for a few minutes, ignoring me, and then loped toward the barn.

"Ruben, run!" I shouted, but it was too late.

I covered my ears to screen the sound and huddled in the dirt.

Sometime later, a loud sniffing made me look up. Raymond was moving freely about the yard. In a macabre sense, he was beautiful. No mutation or disfigurement, just a thick gray coat and massive chest.

His diamond-shaped eyes rested on me, and then he looked toward the house. I wanted to cry in despair. The front door was open.

Crossing the dark space quickly, he trotted inside and left me staring at Josh's dead face.

I suppose I should have wondered why he hadn't killed me, but the thought of what would happen tomorrow morning filled my head. Poor Raymond. I'd have to hide his gun. They weren't worth it, either one of them.

The moon was still bright, and I had a few hours till dawn.

We always kept a spare key to the truck in one of the barn's cabinets. I went to get it and to find Ruben. His body lay in plain view next to the table saw, but I had to look awhile before finding his head near a pear basket. Its soft flesh had been gnawed down to the bone near the base of his skull. Only a little congealing blood remained since the open wound had been licked clean.

I carried or dragged the separate pieces of him out to our truck, grunting and straining, until he was loaded, and then I did the same for Josh. My last requirement was a sharp-edged shovel. The Idaho forests were vast and deep. No one would ever find out what happened in our front yard on that full moon night in September. Besides me, the only ones who could remember were dead.

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A few hours later, I came back, numb. Our yard was dark and silent with only a few patches of telltale blood for me to clean up. Using buckets of water to dilute the red, I decided to leave the barn alone and let Raymond think he'd run some wild animal down and cornered it in there. That had happened once or twice before.

My true dilemma came when I finished getting rid of the mess. Funny how I never let myself think of them as people. The front door was still half jarred open, and the wolf was still probably prowling around in the house. Sleeping in the barn was the only option for a sane person.

Not even letting myself think, I walked up to the cabin and looked in. What I saw didn't surprise me.

His great body lay resting quietly by the fire. He lifted his head when I reached the doorway, and he growled softly.

"Shhhh, Raymond. It's just me," I said tiredly.

He stared for a moment and then turned back to the fire. Orange lights flickered off plywood walls. Faint crackling of low burned embers made the only sound in the world.

I stepped in without taking my eyes off him. Right then I didn't care if he killed me. For ten years I'd been living with a mystery that had retarded my life. For all his fears about keeping locked doors between us, I don't think I ever believed he'd hurt me. Somewhere, buried in the wolf, Raymond still lived and breathed.

Sitting down on the couch, I pulled my boots off and then went to wash my hands, ignoring him on purpose. I behaved as though he belonged there. When I came back into the living room, he raised his head and whined.

I went to him and sat down on the floor. His low growl kept me still for a moment, studying him. His large head rested on wide paws, and his massive size seemed to be the only truly unusual aspect.

Reaching out slowly, I laid my hand on his back and scratched gently. He turned and looked directly into my eyes. Not human, not animal, he was somehow more than both.

I stretched out on the floor beside him and ran my hand up to his velvet head. His muscles relaxed, and he rolled over to push his back into my chest and stomach.

This was all he wanted . . . all he ever wanted, to come inside and lie by the fire. No blood or cold, dark forests, just warmth and shelter like all of us. After all these years, he'd come home.

I got up once to lock the door and get a blanket, then curled up next to him and tried to sleep. No more lonely wolf-nights. His place would be lying on the floor next to me, and all the affection that couldn't be lavished on Raymond was his.

Because he'd take it.

My future had been set for a long time. No marriage or children were ahead for Raymond or me. We had no one but each other and both of us denied the empty starvation turning us into husks. But that was over now. Now someone was mine.

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The next morning I woke quickly when his convulsion started. His transformation should be private. I had no right to stay and watch. Hiding in my bedroom, I listened to fuzzy, muted groans until I heard a human voice coughing.

“Lisa!”

He was kneeling on the floor by the fireplace, horror and panic contorting his face. I ran to him.

“Why am I in the house?” He stumbled up. His body seemed thin and pale in the cold morning light, and I noticed he wasn’t vomiting. “Lisa! What am I doing in the house?”

I pulled the blanket up around his shoulders. “You should lie down on the couch.”

“How did I get inside the house?”

I dropped my gaze and whispered calmly, “I let you in.”

“Why would you—? How could you—?” His voice grew hysterical. “Oh God, don’t you understand? You saw what I did to Dad, and you still don’t understand? I don’t remember anything that happens. I can’t remember anything I’ve done.”

“You didn’t love Dad.”

“That’s a stupid thing to say right now.”

“No, I mean you’d never do anything to me. You just stayed by the fire all night. You aren’t as sick as usual, are you?”

“What?” he snapped.

“You aren’t sick because you didn’t eat anything wolves eat.” I tried not to think about the skin on Ruben’s head. “You just laid in here by the fire. And I’ll let you in again next month if you leave the house.”

“No!” His expression changed to rage. “How do you think I’d feel if I woke up and found you in four pieces? Huh? Good morning, Raymond.”

“You let me sleep on the floor next to you.” I suddenly crouched down, pushing my face into my knees. “You never think about me. You just black out and wake up sick. I’m the one who sits up alone, wondering, picturing you dead in a ditch somewhere.” All

the anger from the past ten years came bubbling up and poured out. "You never talk to me! You never let me have friends or go to dances or movies like everyone else. . . ."

I trailed off, fighting tears, and he stared at me in a stunned silence.

"Lisa." He looked down at his own pale body. "Stay here."

He went into his bedroom and came back wearing a pair of Levi's. Running a hand through his thick hair, he sighed. "I don't know what to say. You know I can't change anything."

Lost for expression, I simply said, "I need you to be in the house."

He dropped down beside me. "What if I hurt you?"

I shook my head slowly. "You won't. I know you won't."

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The years passed, as years do. Days seem to slide one into the other until you wake up and find thin streaks of silver in your hair and your hands have grown brown and wrinkled. I sit in the rocker now on wolf-nights because the floor has grown too hard for my old bones.

Our house is peaceful, and I feel we've lived a good life. Across the room by the fire lies the massive wolf with his head on his paws. His chest is smattered with white, and he has long since grown too old to hunt. It's strange, but an odd contentment filled Raymond after the wolf began to spend his hours inside with me. A calm that reflected in them both.

No one ever found out about Josh and Ruben Trotter. They sleep in the wet ground somewhere down the road. They are a tribute, a sacrifice . . . to the warmth and fire of our hearth.



WOLF

Michael Moorcock

Throughout his long and prolific career, **Michael Moorcock** has demonstrated what can be achieved by ignoring or, better still, actively subverting the constraints of genre and category. Works such as *Behold the Man*, *The Black Corridor*, *Stormbringer*, *The War Hound and the World's Pain*, and *Mother London* freely combine elements of horror, science fiction, fantasy, and the literary novel. They are tales intended to unsettle and designed to undermine generic expectations and present the reader with something much more disturbing—and rewarding. In addition to earning a Guardian Fiction Prize and a long list of other awards, Moorcock has been inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame and been recognized for his lifetime achievement with, among others, a World Fantasy Award, a Stoker Award, and a Prix Utopiales. In 1987, *Mother London* was nominated for a Whitbread Prize with Salman Rushdie (*The Satanic Verses*) and Bruce Chatwynd (*Utz*).

The theme of men as wolves appears frequently in Moorcock's work, particularly in connection with his most famous character, Elric of Melniboné, also known as the White Wolf and the Wolf of the Snarling Sea. "Wolf" was one of the author's earliest adult stories, written in France in the 1950s and originally published in his first short story collection, *The Deep Fix*.



WHOSE LITTLE TOWN ARE YOU, FRIEND? Who owns you here? Wide and strong, you have an atmosphere of detached impermanence as you sit in the shallow valley with your bastion of disdainful pines surrounding you; with your slashed, gashed earth roads and your gleaming graveyards, cool under the sun. Here I stand in your peaceful centre, among the low houses, looking for your owner. Night is looming in my mind's backwaters.

I stop a long-jawed man with down-turned, sensuous lips. He rocks on his feet and stares at me in silence, his grey eyes brooding.

"Who owns this town?" I ask him.

"The people," he says. "The residents."

I laugh at the joke, but he refuses to join me, does not even smile. "Seriously—tell me. Who owns this town?"

He shrugs and walks off. I laugh louder: "Who owns this town, friend? Who owns it?" Does he hate me?

Without a mood, what is a man, anyway? A man has to have some kind of mood, even when he dreams. Scornfully, I laugh at the one who refused to smile and I watch his back as he walks stiffly and self-consciously over a bridge of wood and metal which spans soft water, full of blossom and leaves, flowing in the sunlight.

In my hand is a cool silver flask loaded with sweet fire. I know it is there. I lift it to my mouth and consume the fire, letting it consume me, also. Blandly, we destroy each other, the fire and I.

My stomach is full of flame and my legs are tingling, as soft as soda water, down to where my feet ache. *Don't leave me, sweetheart, with your hair of desire and your mockeries hollow in the moaning dawn. Don't leave me with the salt rain rushing*

down my cold face. I laugh again and repeat the man's words: "The people—the residents!" Ho ho ho! But there is no-one to hear my laughter now unless there are inhabitants in the white town's curtained dwellings. *Where are you, sweetheart—where's your taunting body, now, and the taste of your fingernails in my flesh?*

Harsh smoke drowns my sight and the town melts as I fall slowly down towards the cobbles of the street and a pain begins to inch its way through my stinging face.

.

Where's the peace that you seek in spurious godliness of another man—a woman? Why is it never there?

I regain my sight and look upwards to where the blue sky fills the world until it is obscured by troubled sounds which flow from a lovely face dominated by eyes asking questions which make me frustrated and angry, since I cannot possibly answer them. Not one of them. I smile, in spite of my anger and say, cynically: "It makes a change, doesn't it?" The girl shakes her head and the worried noises still pour from her mouth. Lips as red as blood—splashed on slender bones, a narrow, delicate skull. "Who—? Why are you—? What happened to you?"

"That's a very personal question, my dear," I say patronizingly. "But I have decided not to resent it."

"Thank you," says she. "Are you willing to rise and be helped somehow?"

Of course I am, but I would not let her know just yet. "I am seeking a friend who came this way," I say. "Perhaps you know her? She is fat with my life—full of my soul. She should be easy to recognize."

"No—I haven't . . ."

"Ah—well, if you happen to notice her, I would appreciate it if you would let me know. I shall be in the area for a short while. I have become fond of this town." A thought strikes me; "Perhaps you own it?"

"No."

"Please excuse the question if you are embarrassed by it. I, personally, would be quite proud to own a town like this. Is it for sale, do you think?"

"Come, you'd better get up. You might be arrested. Up you get."

There is a disturbing reluctance on the part of the residents to tell me the owner of the town. Of course, I could not afford to buy it—I asked cunningly, in the hope of discovering who the owner was. Maybe she is too clever for me. The idea is not appealing.

"You're like a dead bird," she smiles, "with your wings broken."

I refuse her hand and get up quickly. "Lead the way."

She frowns and then says: "Home I think." So off we go with her walking ahead. I point upwards: "Look—there's a cloud the shape of a cloud!" She smiles and I feel encouraged to such a degree that I want to thank her.

We reach her house with its green door opening directly onto the street. There are windows with red and yellow curtains and the white paint covering the stone is beginning to flake. She produces a key, inserts it into the large black iron lock and pushes the door wide open, gesturing gracefully for me to enter before her. I incline my head and walk into the darkened hallway of the house. It smells of lavender and is full of old polished oak and brass plates, horse-brasses, candlesticks with no candles in them. On my right is a staircase which twists up into gloom, the stairs covered by dark red carpet.

There are ferns in vases, placed on high shelves. Several vases of ferns are on the window-sill by the door.

"I have a razor if you wish to shave," she informs me. Luckily for her, I am self-critical enough to realize that I need a shave. I thank her and she mounts the stairs, wide skirt swinging, leading me to the upstairs floor and a small bathroom smelling of perfume and disinfectant.

She switches on the light. Outside, the blue of the sky is deepening and the sun has already set. She shows me the safety-razor, soap, towel. She turns a tap and water gushes out

into her cupped hand. "Still hot," she says, turning and closing the door behind her. I am tired and make a bad job of shaving. I wash my hands as an afterthought and then go to the door to make sure it isn't locked. I open the door and peer out into the lighted passage. I shout: "Hey!" and her head eventually comes into sight around another door at the far end of the passage. "I've shaved."

"Go downstairs into the front room," she says. "I'll join you there in a few minutes." I grin at her and my eyes tell her that I know she is naked beneath her clothes. They all are. Without their clothes and their hair, where would they be? *Where is she? She came this way—I scented her trail right here, to this town. She could even be hiding inside this woman—fooling me. She was always clever in her own way. I'll break her other hand, listen to the bones snap, and they won't catch me. She sucked my life out of me and they blamed me for breaking her fingers. I was just trying to get at the ring I gave her. It was hidden by the blaze of the others.*

She turned me into a sharp-toothed wolf.

I thunder down the stairs, deliberately stamping on them, making them moan and creak. I locate the front room and enter it. Deep leather chairs, more brass, more oak, more ferns in smoky glass of purple and scarlet. A fireplace without a fire. A soft carpet, multicoloured. A small piano with black-and-white keys and a picture in a frame on top of it.

There is a white-clothed table with cutlery and plates for two. Two chairs squat beside the table.

I stand with my back to the fireplace as I hear her pointed-heeled shoes tripping down the stairs. "Good evening," I say politely when she comes in, dressed in a tight frock of dark blue velvet, with rubies around her throat and at her ears. There are dazzling rings on her fingers and I shudder, but manage to control myself.

"Please sit down." She repeats the graceful gesture of the hand, indicating a leather chair with a yellow cushion. "Do you

feel better now?" I am suspicious and will not answer her. It might be a trick question, one never knows. "I'll get dinner," she tells me, "I won't be long." Again I've defeated her. She can't win at this rate.

.

I consume the foreign meal greedily and only realize afterwards that it might have been poisoned. Philosophically I reflect that it is too late now as I wait for coffee. I will test the coffee and see if it smells of bitter almonds. If it does, I will know it contains poison. I try to remember if any of the food I have already eaten tasted of bitter almonds. I don't think so. I feel comparatively safe.

She brings in the coffee smoking in a big brown earthenware pot. She sits down and pours me a cup. It smells good and, relievedly, I discover it does not have the flavour of bitter almonds. Come to think of it, I am not altogether sure what bitter almonds smell like.

"You may stay the night here, if you wish. There is a spare room."

"Thank you," I say, letting my eyes narrow in a subtle question, but she looks away from me and reaches a slim hand for the coffee pot. "Thank you," I repeat. She doesn't answer me. What's her game? She takes a breath, is about to say something, looks quickly at me, changes her mind, says nothing. I laugh softly, leaning back in my chair with my hand clasped around my coffee cup.

"There are wolves and there are sheep," I say, as I have often said. "Which do you think you are?"

"Neither," says she.

"Then you are sheep," say I. "The wolves know what they are—what their function is. I am wolf."

"Really," she says and it is obvious that she is bored by my philosophy, not understanding it. "You had better go to bed now—you are tired."

"If you insist," I say lightly. "Very well."

She shows me up to the room overlooking the unlit street and bids me goodnight. Closing the door, I listen carefully for the sound of a key turning, but the sound doesn't come. The room contains a high, old-fashioned bed, a standard lamp with a parchment shade with flowers pressed between two thicknesses, an empty bookcase and a wooden chair, beautifully carved. I feel the chair with my fingertips and shiver with delight at the sensation I receive. I pull back the quilt covering the bed and inspect the sheets which are clean and smell fresh. There are two white pillows, both very soft. I extract myself from my suit, taking off my shoes and socks and leaving my underpants on. I switch off the light and, trembling a little, get into the sheets. I am soon asleep, but it is still very early. I am convinced that I shall wake up at dawn.

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I open my eyes in the morning and pale sunshine forces its way between gaps in the curtains. I lie in bed trying to go back to sleep, but cannot. I push away the covers, which have slipped partly off the bed, and get up. I go to the window and look down into the street.

Incredibly, a huge hare is loping along the pavement, its nose twitching. A lorry roars past, its gears grating, but the hare continues its imperturbable course. I am tensed, excited. I open my door and run along the passage to the woman's room, entering with a rush. She is asleep, one arm sprawled outwards, the hand dangling over the edge of her bed, her shoulders pale and alive. I take hold of one shoulder in a strong grip designed to hurt her into wakefulness. She cries out, sits up quivering.

"Quick," I say—"Come and see. There is a hare in the street!"

"Go away and let me sleep," she tells me, "let me sleep."

"No! You must come and look at the big hare in the street. How did it get there?"

She rises and follows me back to my room. I leap towards the window and see with relief that the hare is still there. "Look!"

I point towards it and she joins me at the window. She, too, is amazed. "Poor thing," she gasps. "We must save it."

"Save it?" I am astounded. "Save it? No, I will kill it and we can eat it."

She shudders. "How could you be so cruel?" The hare disappears around a corner of the street. I am furious and all the nerves of my body are taut. "It has gone!"

"It will probably be all right," she says in a self-conciliatory tone and this makes me more angry. I begin to sob with frustration. She puts a hand on my arm. "What is the matter?" I shrug off the hand, then think better of it. I begin to cry against her breast. She pats me on the back and I feel better. "Let me come to bed with you," I plead.

"No," she says quietly. "You must rest."

"Let me sleep with *you*," I insist, but she breaks from my grasp and backs towards the door. "No! Rest."

I follow her, my eyes hot in my skull, my body full. "You owe me something," I tell her viciously. "You all do."

"Go away," she says threateningly, desperate and afraid of me. I continue to move towards her, beyond the door, along the passage. She starts to run for her room but I run also, and catch her. I catch her before she reaches the room. She screams. I clutch at her fingers. I bend them back slowly, putting my other hand over her mouth to stop her horrible noises. The bones snap in the slim, pale flesh. Not all at once.

"You made me wolf," I snarl. "And sheep must die." My teeth seek her pounding jugular, my nose scents the perfume of her throat. I slide my sharp teeth through skin and sinew. Blood oozes into my mouth. As I kill her, I sob.

*Why did she suck the soul of me from the wounds she made?
Why am I wolf because of her? Or did it always lurk there, need-
ing only the pain she made to release the ferocity?*

But she is dead.

I had forgotten. I had sought her in this pleasant town.

Ah, now the other is dead, too.

Let murder drown me until I am nothing but a snarling
speck, harmless and protected by my infinitesimal size.

Oh, God, my bloody darling . . .



BENEATH THE SKIN

James Lowder

For more than two decades, **James Lowder** has worked extensively on both sides of the editorial blotter. His publications include the best-selling, widely translated dark fantasy novels *Prince of Lies* and *Knight of the Black Rose*; short fiction for such anthologies as *Shadows Over Baker Street* and *The Repentant*; and comic book scripts for DC, Devil's Due, and Moonstone. He's written hundreds of feature articles, columns, and film and book reviews for *Amazing Stories*, *Science Fiction Age*, *Dragon*, and similar magazines. As an editor, Lowder has directed book lines or series for both large and small publishing houses and has helmed more than a dozen critically acclaimed anthologies. He has received five Origins Awards and an ENnie Award and has been a finalist for the International Horror Guild Award and the Stoker Award.

"Beneath the Skin" features Simon Synge, a typical Lowder protagonist: a would-be hero whose unrelenting devotion to a cause gives him the potential to become just as much a monster as the dark things he battles.



WITH EACH BLOW OF THE HAMMER, the wolf pelt shuddered like a still-living thing and gave up a little more of its stolen human shape. The iron nails holding the skin fast to the cottage door seemed to rob it of its unnatural power. Where once the thing had possessed features combining man's and beast's, the final spikes left the pelt looking like any other hunter's trophy, save for its unusual size.

Simon Synge stepped back from his handiwork and handed the coal hammer to the boy at his side. Adjusting the revolver holstered at his hip, he crouched before the long leather satchel he'd deposited on the ground earlier. It resembled a cricketing bag, but its contents were intended for anything but sport. Knives, metal flasks, and wooden stakes—all gifts from his mentor, renowned occultist Arkady Grin—clattered together as he reached past them to a velvet-wrapped item nestled at the bottom. He whispered a prayer as he unfolded the red cloth, revealing a simple silver cross on a long silver chain.

"The final step," he said as he turned back to the cottage door. "The Lord's mark to—"

Synge's sun-browned hand clamped down on the boy's fingers, crushing them. The boy whimpered in pain as the scholar pulled him back from the pelt. The whimper became a gasp when the child saw the wolf skin straining to meet his touch.

"Don't mistake this cursed thing for harmless, Lukas," Synge noted sternly, his German tainted by a faint Cornish drawl. "Now go, lad. Get your mother."

As Lukas ran off around the cottage, a mangy dog sprang up from its resting place in the shade and raced after him. Hunger had left both boy and hound sickly thin, and their flight reminded Simon Synge of skeletons on the move. It was not a pleasant

image, and the memories it sparked—a nightmarish whirl of all the unnatural things he'd witnessed in his travels with Professor Grin across North Africa and the still-bloody battlefields of the Great War—were more unpleasant still. Synge did not dwell upon those ghastly thoughts, returning instead to the rite the boy's intemperate curiosity had interrupted. He completed the prayer and hung the cross's chain on the topmost nail.

Where the silver symbol fell upon the dirty yellow-gray pelt, from the tip of what had been the creature's nose to the space between its eyes, the hair sizzled and burned. Foul-smelling smoke drifted up. The skin bucked and spasmed. One of the iron nails slipped a little and the door groaned, but soon the struggle ended, with the wolf pelt still securely splayed.

"So long as the cross remains in place, we've robbed the thing of movement," the scholar explained to Lukas and his mother when the two arrived a moment later. He glanced at the dirt on the woman's dress, caked from where she'd knelt beside her husband's grave. "You noticed nothing odd about the earth over his body, Frau Metzger?"

The widow shook her head, the movement slow and mechanical.

Synge nodded. "We've got the upper hand. So long as the wolf skin—"

"Wait," Frau Metzger interrupted, then scowled at the sound of a small voice keening pitifully within the cabin. "How long has she been crying?"

The scholar's thick eyebrows knit in consternation. "Crying, you say? Who—? Ah, the infant. I have no idea. I hadn't noticed. . . ."

"I'll see to her, Mama." Lukas hesitated when he got to the door, uncertain if he should touch the wood upon which the pelt was hung, until Synge pushed it open for him. "Thank you," the boy murmured, then slipped past.

"So long as the wolf skin remains as I've arranged it," the scholar continued, "your husband will rest easy. Unlikely as it

may sound, had we not fixed the cursed thing with iron nails and a cross, it would have called out for someone else to wear it. And if the skin didn't find a weak-willed victim among the living, it would have beckoned your husband's corpse from the ground."

Sudden fear dissipated the grief clouding the woman's face, and for the first time since witnessing her husband's death at Synge's hands, she met the scholar's cold blue eyes. "You said that you saved him." Tears streamed down her hollow cheeks. "You said that his soul—"

"Is now in God's hands. Yes, that's so. But the flesh is the Devil's realm, even after the heart stops and the spirit flees." He waited for the widow's sobbing to subside before he concluded: "You must be strong, Frau Metzger, and ready to do whatever the Lord requires of you. The first victory is ours. There may be other battles yet to fight."

Lukas came meekly to the door, the squalling infant cradled in his arms. "She's hungry, Mama."

"Excuse me, Herr Professor," the young woman said. She cupped her son's face with her hand. "Thank you for being so kind to your sister." Then she took the baby from him and went inside.

Synge did not correct the widow; he was no professor, merely a disciple trying to carry on the work of his dead mentor. He owed Grin that much after the disaster in Archangel, when the night things exploited Synge's weaknesses and got their claws into the old man. He could still hear the professor's screams if he listened closely at any mirror or bit of brightly polished metal. The agonized shrieks reminded the scholar of the dangers sentiment presented to those who opposed the dark.

Synge put the boy to work leashing the hound to a tree near his father's grave. It would be three days before the skin, robbed of a human host, diminished enough in vitality that it could be destroyed, and they must take every precaution while they waited. The skin itself remained dangerous, but there were even greater threats. The dead man had not been the only lycanthrope in the valley. The clues that had led the scholar

to Metzger suggested at least two more of the Hell-touched creatures prowled the area.

As night descended upon the valley's blighted vineyards and twisted woods, Synge checked the pelt one final time, secured the door from the inside, then settled into a chair by the grimy hearth. At a table nearby, Frau Metzger and her son hunched over the food he had given them from his travel pack. They tore into the bread and cheese as if they had not eaten in weeks, though Synge knew otherwise. True, they'd suffered the usual deprivations plaguing the Rhineland since the Armistice. But for a few days, at least, Metzger had provided them with more than enough food.

That, surely, was the lure with which the were-beasts had tempted the idle vineyard hand: become like us and you will find enough to eat for you and your family, no matter how long the blight withers the vines or how many occupying soldiers descend upon our land. Metzger had been passionately devoted to his wife and children. Synge had recognized that even in the brief time he'd spent with the man, before the terrible secret was revealed and the brief battle begun. Such strong emotion was easy to pervert. Grin used to say passion of any sort was the gateway through which the Devil invaded a man's flesh.

Synge studied the woman and her son. In time, Metzger would have turned them from the righteous path, too, or devoured them when they resisted. The woman might have fought him. She knew right and wrong, at least. She'd proved that by insisting they inter what remained of her husband's soul-bought bounty alongside him. Perhaps that was why they ate so eagerly now; they knew this food would be the last to cross their table for some time.

Frau Metzger noticed the eyes upon her. "Are you not eating?" she asked, wiping crumbs from her face.

"Water will be enough for me tonight," he replied.

Synge continued to watch as the woman cleared off the table and ushered Lukas to bed. She discovered a chunk of sausage

hidden in his little fist. After chiding him for his greed, she knelt beside him and together they prayed. Though he was not listening closely, the scholar still heard his name among their murmured reverences.

He nodded in satisfaction. Frau Metzger understood what was required of them. She would raise her children to do their duty to God, to reap the proper lesson from her husband's mistakes. She was the sort of wife Synge might have wished for not so long ago, before he set out upon the Lightbringer's Path, as Grin had called it. The work precluded such attachments, though. That was the first thing Synge had learned from the occultist during the awful incident in England that first brought them together.

The scholar's impassive gaze moved from Frau Metzger to her son. The boy reminded Synge of his once-dear nephew. The two children shared a gentleness of demeanor that might have made them fast friends, had Christopher not fallen prey to the night things. Had Synge not helped Professor Grin put him in the ground four years past, in much the same way the scholar had slaughtered and buried Herr Metzger that very morning. Only this time there had been no hesitation, no weeping, no revulsion at the blood on his hands.

Synge remained a study in sang-froid as he sat by the cooling hearth. His breathing was calm, his sleep, when he let it overtake him, appeared to be untroubled by nightmares. His hand remained steady upon Grin's old Webley .455 service revolver, cradled in his lap.

Only the soft creak of the front door opening disturbed Synge's rest. At the sound he leapt to his feet and leveled the pistol at the small shape on the threshold, but it slipped outside before he could fire. He hurried to the door, then paused, wary of an ambush. The moon shone brightly, and in its cold white light he could see that the pelt hung quiescent. The locking bar lay next to the door, carefully placed there by someone inside, not shaken from its duty by a would-be intruder. A theory formed in

his mind, one confirmed an instant later by the happy barking that rang out behind the cottage.

Synge hurried into the night. He found Lukas, as he had expected to, standing near his father's grave. The tethered hound eagerly nudged the boy, even as it licked its chops in anticipation of another stolen morsel. Fortunately, neither the child nor the dog had dislodged the sword resting point-down in the newly turned earth—a moonlight-touched metal cross. No damage had been done.

"Inside," the scholar said coldly.

"I thought Shutz would guard Papa better if I fed him," Lukas started to explain, but stammered to a stop when his mother came around the cottage's corner. She had her infant crushed to her chest with her left hand, a hunting knife clutched in her right. The baby, jarred from sleep and shocked by the chill air, began to wail piteously. The rise and fall of the child's cry filled the night.

"We need to go back inside," Synge said. He raked the tree line with his gaze. "The pelt on the door will keep the other night things from invading the house, but we're unsafe out here."

The scholar's concern was borne out a moment later by the hound's ferocious growl and the appearance of a pair of horrible shapes at the wood's edge. It was as if the figures had coalesced from the air, so abrupt was their arrival. They stood still for an instant only—huge, animal-headed things, part man, part wolf, perched on massively muscled legs with joints that bent the wrong way. Their fur bristled, hackles as stiff as needles. Their clawed hands flexed in anticipation. Then they attacked.

Their footfalls were silent, their movements so quick they were revealed only in their results. One moment the beast-men stood at the clearing's limit, the next the hound's tether snapped and the animal tumbled broken-backed through the air. Lukas flew off the ground, trapped in the arms of the larger of the two monsters. The beast threw back its wolf-jawed head and howled.

Synge took aim at that gaping, screaming maw and fired. The bullet did not find its mark, though. In the same instant the scholar pulled the trigger, a blur passed between him and his target. The second were-beast jerked to a stop, its barely seen charge halted. The creature's right arm hung limp at its side, dangling from a shoulder torn open by a silver bullet. The wolf hide was peeled back from the wound like tattered cloth to reveal bloody human flesh beneath. Shock twisted the monster's face. The expression was almost pathetic.

Before the sound of the pistol's report had died away, the two creatures were gone, vanished as abruptly as they had appeared. Only Lukas's cries for help, growing more distant with each passing second, made it clear that the air had not swallowed them up. Soon those cries were gone, and the only sound to be heard was the shrieking of the infant girl still clutched to Frau Metzger's breast.

"No," Synge said as the woman started toward the woods. She ignored him and staggered on, uttering her son's name in a choked gasp every few steps.

The scholar wasn't surprised by her mad bravery. Some mothers would march into Hell itself for their children. His own sister had done nearly that, in hopes of saving her son; she paid for that impulsiveness still.

He stepped between the widow and the forest, and leveled the Webley at her face. "No," he repeated.

Frau Metzger's eyes grew wide. "You doom him! Damn him as his father was damned!"

"I'll kill him before I allow that to happen," the scholar said. "But that may not be necessary." He lowered the pistol. "If the monsters had intended murder, they would have carried out their grim work here. No, they have other uses in mind for your son. That means we have time to act. . . ."

As Frau Metzger sat weeping in the dirt with her crying infant, Synge weighed his options, laid them out as Professor Grin had taught him—as if they were elements of a common

business transaction, items to be assessed and valued with a passionless eye. "We must be soldiers in this," he said at last, more to himself than to the weeping woman. "And if we tempt the Devil with our flesh, it's no more than we do every day we walk upon God's earth."

He took up the hunting knife from where Frau Metzger had dropped it, studied its edge for a moment to be certain it was sharp enough for the task at hand. Then, satisfied, he methodically set about his work, drawing out the iron nails with which he had fixed the wolf pelt to the cottage door.

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His feet did not touch the ground as he ran. The vines and bushes and trees shrank back from him, clearing the way for his pursuit. It was as if his unnatural form repulsed the natural world. Synge took comfort in that, just as he found solace in the clarity of his thoughts and the dispassionate way in which he could regard his new, hideous body.

The transformation had been agonizing, a twisting of sinew and warping of bone that threatened to blot out his consciousness. He had refused to allow the pain to overwhelm his mind, though. To do so would have been as dire a sin as welcoming the newfound power of his limbs or reveling in his heightened senses. Synge did neither. Instead he focused on the undamaged sanctity of his intellect. The wolf pelt had claimed his flesh, left him a hybrid of man and animal, but it had not touched his soul. He felt no more connected to his body now than he felt at one with the passenger car when riding a train.

He took in the landscape with his inhuman senses. The tracks left by the monsters—the sights and sounds and smells of their passing—were leading him toward the Rhine. This was as he had expected. Local legends had drawn him here, and all the stories ended with the accused, like the infamous Stubbe Peeter, tossing away the belt or skin that granted him the power to take on a beast's shape. And the place where the

pelt was hidden away on the eve of the sinner's execution was always near the Rhine.

Why this evil should rear its head now was no mystery to Synge. The Rhine was beset by the chaos wracking all of Middle Europe in the aftermath of the Great War. While the down-trodden starved and conquering armies scrambled to claim whatever arms the Kaiser's defeated troops had abandoned in their retreat, rich industrialists rebuilt shattered castles into palaces overlooking the river, just as Bismark and his confederates had done fifty years earlier. Then, as now, the warlords preached the need for order, but refused to see that their strivings only furrowed the field for the Hell-born. They erected their temples to intrigue, wrath, and greed, while the humble houses of God shattered by their wars remained in shambles, to be overtaken by the wild.

Such was the ruin to which the were-beasts' trail led Synge. Huddled on a ledge high above the Rhine, near the moldering corpse of a barrage balloon escaped from Cologne during an air raid, the holy place was now little more than the unsteady arch of a doorway and four low, tumbled walls. The roof had collapsed long ago, the slate carried off for other buildings or buried beneath the weeds that had claimed the once-hallowed ground. Human bones lay tangled in the undergrowth. Certain bones had been gnawed, others left untouched. Synge recognized the pattern. Men made the Sign of the Cross with their right, so the bones of that hand and arm were discarded. The skulls, too, were spared the lycanthropes' teeth, because the Holy Chrism of Baptism made them unpalatable. The rest had been chewed with abandon. A midden stench hung over all, a rank odor of offal and rotted meat that made Synge, with his wolf's sense of smell, wrinkle his snout in disgust as he approached.

In the center of the ruin, near where the altar had stood, crouched one of the monsters. Alert to the newcomer's scent even over the stink of its surroundings, the guard moved forward.

Its right arm still dangled useless at its side, and its wounded shoulder gaped black and blasted in the moonlight. As Synge passed under the doorway arch, the creature growled, though the sound was more question than threat. The guard recognized the markings of its pack mate, saw the confident stride as a sign that the newcomer was at ease. Yet the smell was wrong somehow. The guard growled again. This time fear and alarm edged the angry rumble.

Synge did not hesitate. Capitalizing on the monster's confusion, he closed the distance between them until he was near enough for the other to see the cross burned upside-down along his snout. Then, just as the guard opened its jaws to bark a warning, Synge lunged and drove the thumb of his left hand into the beast's gaping shoulder wound. The cry of alarm became a grunt of pain, one silenced an instant later by razor-clawed fingers. The blow was as precise, as emotionless, as any surgeon's cut. The were-beast collapsed, its throat torn out, its warning undelivered.

The trail snaked through the fallen church to a rocky slope beyond, where a rift split the stone like a slashed wrist. Synge moved with steady, certain steps to the cave entrance. This had been a hiding place for priests in other times of trouble. What lurked within the cave now had no holiness about it.

For the first time Synge wished he'd brought a weapon. That simply hadn't been possible. His fingers could no longer grip a pistol or operate a trigger with any dexterity. He might have been able to wield a sword. He was a passable duelist, as Metzger had learned that morning, and the blade now planted in the new grave had been created for just such battles—forged decades past from a cross by a hunchbacked scholar and a former Prussian soldier devoted to the destruction of the Devil's pawns. Yet Synge didn't dare risk taking the blade with him; its presence helped keep the dead man in the ground until the cursed pelt was destroyed.

No, the only weapons available were his wits and the teeth

and claws afforded him by his inhuman guise. He prayed they would be sufficient.

The cave's ceiling was low enough that Synge had to crawl a short ways before the passage opened up to a wide, tall chamber and he could stand again. No sooner had he entered than he was greeted by the low whines and yips of infant wolves, and the deeper, wavering yowl of warning from a hybrid she-wolf. As his eyes adjusted to the faint light bleeding in from the entryway, he saw the three cubs suckling at the engorged breasts of a were-beast. Farther back in the cave, Lukas Metzger crouched in speechless horror.

Synge edged along the perimeter, closer to the boy. The cubs seemed to recognize him, their noises happy greetings for their sire, but the she-beast rolled ponderously to her feet and regarded him with baleful yellow eyes. Positioning herself between Synge and her young, she crouched upon her weirdly jointed legs and snarled. Slather dripped from her black lips.

The scholar understood it all. The pups were hers, the product of her coupling with Metzger in beast form. That was why the young mistook him for their sire; they recognized the pelt's scent. But they had no trace of humanity in them, or not enough that they appeared as more than simple animals. To give them the ability to take on a more human shape, to resemble their parents, they needed a human's skin to wear. The skin of an innocent child would serve the monsters best.

Synge continued to edge along the cave's wall, giving the she-beast as wide a berth as possible. If he did not menace the cubs directly, he might be able to get Lukas away. She would not fight unless absolutely necessary, not when a battle might leave the young unprotected.

Lukas cowered as Synge approached. The scholar leaned close, reached down with one clawed hand in hopes of turning the child's face toward him so that Lukas might see the cross on his snout and understand, but he did not get the chance. The pups whimpered in fear even as Synge caught the scent of

the last of the monsters—the pack leader—entering the cave. The creature crawled into the cavern and rose up, a foot taller than Synge and muscled like a circus strongman. Around this creature's waist hung a belt braided from the skins of wolves and the faces peeled from thirteen hanged men.

Before he charged into battle, Synge willed himself to speak: "Close your eyes, boy," he rumbled to Lukas, "and lift your voice to God."

Spoken by that monstrous, lupine mouth, the words sounded obscene.

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"The age of the belt I recovered from their leader suggests it might well be the token of Stubbe Peeter himself." Simon Synge paused for his listener to react. Though she did not, he continued anyway: "I suspect it had been passed from damned soul to damned soul since that infamous man's death in 1590. My dear Katharine, it's likely I've destroyed the last of their kind—in the Rhine Valley, at least."

The scholar's sister seemed not to hear him, much as Synge himself appeared oblivious to the pleasant, autumn-hued English garden surrounding them. Katharine's eyes followed a pair of sparrows flitting among the topiary and statues. She watched the birds dart and swoop through the gathering dusk, until they settled on the outstretched wings of a large granite angel. "And the boy?" she asked in a sweet voice.

"As I explained, he's safe. At least, he was when I left him a fortnight ago. And we burned the monsters' skins after enough time had passed for them to be destroyed."

A frown tugged at the corners of the woman's small, heart-shaped mouth. "No, Simon, not that boy," she said, turning her sad eyes upon her brother. "Christopher. My son. Your nephew. Did you save him yet?"

She had posed the same question to him for four years. But Christopher was dead. Katharine had seen the child's life ended,

watched Professor Grin and her brother destroy him. The boy had been beyond Grin's help, beyond even the aid of the experts he'd consulted—Edward Janus, ex-Army officer and collector of supernatural artifacts, and a young theologian by the name of Phibes, renowned for his research into curses and ancient rites. They'd been unable to solve the mystery of the possessed lead soldiers through which the night things had lured the child's soul into the dark.

"You know Christopher is gone," Synge said after an unpleasant pause. "I can't change that. But I swore to fight the powers of darkness in his name, and I have done so."

Katharine leaned away from him, disgusted. "You think of yourself as a hero, Simon, but you couldn't be more wrong. You're not even a living thing now." She slid to the far end of the bench, into the shadow of the stone angel. "I can prove it, you know. You've no marks on you. Not even from the fight with the monsters on the Rhine."

Poisoned with the first hints of hysteria, her voice rose and grew shrill. The other inmates loitering in the garden echoed her excitement, and soon the courtyard rang with the same raucous screams that filled the cells of the massive, gray-walled asylum surrounding them on all sides.

Synge spoke to his sister calmly, but she refused to be comforted. "Living things have scars," she sneered. Curling the blunt-nailed fingers of one hand into claws, she lunged forward and raked the air before the scholar's face. He did not blink, did not flinch. "You see," Katharine screamed. "You've no fear of being hurt. You weren't like that before you followed that butcher off into the world."

Hysteria gripped her fully now, and a tall, loose-limbed attendant appeared at her side. "King Laugh has come to visit, eh? Have you been telling her those stories again, Mister Synge?"

"Not stories, lessons," the scholar said flatly. "Examples of how order can triumph over chaos." He did not explain that the

tales were true; Grin had taught him long ago that evil's greatest strength was the doubting minds of even the wisest men.

"Order over chaos?" The attendant snorted a laugh more genial than swinish. "I've not seen it here, even with the flowers and the neat little paths. I've not seen those pleasant, tidy things cure anyone—though a patient bashes his skull open now and then on one of the statues. That's a cure, after a fashion."

The discord in the courtyard grew, so that the attendant could barely be heard above the cacophony. One of the inmates had begun to burrow into a flowerbed like a mole. Another plucked and ate the leaves from a topiary deer. Laughter poured from Katharine Rowley, a shrieking noise that had no joy or humor in it, just the raucous bray of madness. The sound was multiplied a hundredfold by the lunatics crying out through the barred windows surrounding the garden.

Through it all, Simon Synge sat silent and unmoving, his square chin thrust out, his mouth a hard line.

The attendant blew a whistle to summon assistance. "I don't know how you can ignore this riot," he said to the scholar as other white-coated men arrived to gather up the rowdiest of the patients.

"Our reason, properly trained, allows us to conquer all disorder."

The attendant shook his head. "Mine must not be properly trained, then. When they get to howling like this—" he gestured at Katharine, who had drawn her knees up to her chest; she rocked back and forth on the bench, spewing laughter—"I sometimes throw back my head and howl right along with them."

"We must never give in to that urge," Synge said. His tone was a combination of the priest's practiced pedantry and the soldier's blunt expectation of authority. "We must make the world inhospitable for the things that feast upon bedlam. We must give the unfortunate victims of madness a light of reason toward which they should move, even as the righteous move

day by day toward the radiance of the City of God. We must heed His voice—”

“Pretender!” Katharine screamed. The hysteria had suddenly fled, leaving her eyes bright with pain. “God wouldn’t speak to you!”

She crawled along the bench on hands and knees until she was just inches from her brother’s face. Seen side by side, so close together, revealed how unevenly the weight of the past four years had fallen on the two. The scholar’s hair was still the brown of fresh-turned earth, his blue eyes clear, his face tanned and unblemished. His sister looked three decades his senior, instead of a meager three years. Her skin had grown sallow and transparent. Her once-golden hair had faded to the hue of sun-bleached straw. Sorrow had blasted her entire being, blunting her beauty and deadening the musicality of her voice.

“You know nothing of the Lord’s will,” she whispered.

As the attendant placed a surprisingly gentle hand on Katharine’s shoulder and pulled her away from her brother, she tore back the long sleeves of her dress to reveal thickly bandaged arms. “He wills us to take on suffering,” she said in a throaty growl. “If we’re to be worthy in His eyes, we must accept pain. . . .”

The attendant tried to stop her when she reached down to pull away her bandages, but she knocked him aside with the strength known only to the mad. With trembling fingers she peeled away the wrappings. Self-inflicted scars crisscrossed her arms, scabbed gouges and ragged tears blotched her flesh. “Even *your* pain, Simon,” she said. “Even yours.”

Synge heard the attendant call for a straitjacket, saw him rise up to restrain Katharine. He saw, too, his sister close her right hand over her left arm and grit her teeth against the anticipated agony. The attendants would not reach her in time. There was nothing else to do.

He balled his hand into a fist and struck her in the face.

There was no anger in the blow. The act had been fueled by no more passion than the slaughter of the bestial guard at the ruined little church. It was the action reason demanded.

The attendant checked Katharine's breathing and made certain the blow had only split her lip and knocked her unconscious. To a chorus of screeches and barks from the inmates crowded at the barred windows, the warders lifted her from the dirt. The attendant handed Synge a handkerchief to wipe the blood from his knuckles. The spatter of gore came away as if it had never touched his hand.

"Don't worry, sir," the attendant said. "No one will blame you for what happened."

Synge regarded him with blue eyes as cold and hard as the deepest winter ice. "Blame? To deal with unreason, we must be strong enough to do harsh, even terrible things with a pure heart and clear conscience. When God calls upon us—"

The words died in the scholar's throat when he saw the attendant's eyes dart toward Katharine. Then Synge heard the Lord's name and proclamations of His will barked and shrieked from a dozen windows, spoken by madmen with fervor equal to his sister's.

"Begging your pardon," the attendant said, "but I'm going to put something a bit more straightforward in my report: you were trying to do your sister a kindness, knocking her out before she could do herself worse harm. Anyway, that's how we tell the real voice of God from the one these lunatics hear, eh? It's the voice of kindness. . . ."

When he got no answer, the attendant muttered something about having to shepherd the last of the inmates out of the garden and close up the asylum for the coming night. Before he disappeared into the madhouse, he paused and waved with forced politeness to Synge.

"Kindness isn't for us," the scholar whispered into the gloom as the door clanged shut behind the attendant. "It's what we must hope for from God when we're done with His work."

He suddenly wanted to feel the howling enough that he, too, would howl, for the pain to grieve him so keenly that it would batter his heart. It had touched him, not so long ago, before he'd set out on the Lightbringer's Path. But Simon Synge knew he could no longer allow that weakness—not now, with what he knew about the world—and chastised himself for even that fleeting desire. To put his mind aright, he withdrew a small metal mirror from his pocket and pressed his ear to its brightly polished surface. He replaced it after a moment and stood alone in the empty garden, listening as the shutters slammed closed on the barred cell windows, each one muffling another mad cry, until he was once more like the wide-winged granite angel looming above him—untouched by suffering and insensible to the sounds of the night closing in.



LILA THE WEREWOLF

by Peter S. Beagle

Peter S. Beagle's extraordinary body of work—including *A Fine And Private Place*, *The Last Unicorn*, *Tamsin*, and the award-winning "Two Hearts"—has made him an American fantasy legend. He also wrote the animated versions of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Last Unicorn*, plus the fan-favorite "Sarek" episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Beagle's recent projects include the story collections *We Never Talk About My Brother* and *Mirror Kingdoms: The Best of Peter S. Beagle*.

Regarding "Lila," the author notes, "I was still living in the Santa Cruz–Watsonville area when an idea came to me one afternoon, this starkly: 'What if you were living with someone, and she turned out to be a werewolf?' At that point, my wife asked me to take the kitchen garbage to the nearby dump, so I walked it over and started back, still thinking about the domestic arrangements one would have to consider in such a situation. Then this terrible old Yiddish saying came to mind: 'God preserve us from all the things to which we can become accustomed.' Never mind lycanthropy—human history tells us over and over that there is no horror to which people cannot inure and immunize themselves. By the time I got back from the garbage run, I had the basic story clear in my head."



LILA BRAUN HAD BEEN LIVING WITH FARRELL for three weeks before he found out she was a werewolf. They had met at a party when the moon was a few nights past the full, and by the time it had withered to the shape of a lemon Lila had moved her suitcase, her guitar, and her Ewan MacColl records two blocks north and four blocks west to Farrell's apartment on Ninety-eighth Street. Girls sometimes happened to Farrell like that.

One evening, Lila wasn't in when Farrell came home from work at the bookstore. She had left a note on the table, under a can of tuna fish. The note said that she had gone up to the Bronx to have dinner with her mother, and would probably be spending the night there. The coleslaw in the refrigerator should be finished before it went bad.

Farrell ate the tuna fish and gave the coleslaw to Grunewald. Grunewald was a half-grown Russian wolfhound, the color of sour milk. He looked like a goat, and had no outside interests except shoes. Farrell was taking care of him for a girl who was away in Europe for the summer. She sent Grunewald a tape recording of her voice every week.

Farrell went to a movie with a friend, and to the West End afterward for beer. Then he walked home alone under the full moon, which was red and yellow. He reheated the morning coffee, played a record, read through a week-old "News of the Week in Review" section of the Sunday *Times*, and finally took Grunewald up to the roof for the night, as he always did. The dog had been accustomed to sleep in the same bed with his mistress, and the point was not negotiable. Grunewald moored and scrabbled and butted all the way, but Farrell pushed him out among the looming chimneys and ventilators and slammed the door. Then he came back downstairs and went to bed.

He slept very badly. Grunewald's baying woke him twice; and there was something else that brought him half out of bed, thirsty and lonely, with his sinuses full and the night swaying like a curtain as the figures of his dream scurried offstage. Grunewald seemed to have gone off the air—perhaps it was the silence that had awakened him. Whatever the reason, he never really got back to sleep.

He was lying on his back, watching a chair with his clothes on it becoming a chair again, when the wolf came in through the open window. It landed lightly in the middle of the room and stood there for a moment, breathing quickly, with its ears back. There was blood on the wolf's teeth and tongue, and blood on its chest.

Farrell, whose true gift was for acceptance, especially in the morning, accepted the idea that there was a wolf in his bedroom and lay quite still, closing his eyes as the grim, black-lipped head swung towards him. Having once worked at a zoo, he was able to recognize the beast as a Central European subspecies: smaller and lighter-boned than the northern timber wolf variety, lacking the thick, ruffy mane at the shoulders and having a more pointed nose and ears. His own pedantry always delighted him, even at the worst moments.

Blunt claws clicking on the linoleum, then silent on the throw rug by the bed. Something warm and slow splashed down on his shoulder, but he never moved. The wild smell of the wolf was over him, and that did frighten him at last to be in the same room with that smell and the Miro prints on the walls. Then he felt the sunlight on his eyelids, and at the same moment he heard the wolf moan softly and deeply.

The sound was not repeated, but the breath on his face was suddenly sweet and smoky, dizzyingly familiar after the other. He opened his eyes and saw Lila. She was sitting naked on the edge of the bed, smiling, with her hair down.

"Hello, baby," she said. "Move over, baby. I came home."

Farrell's gift was for acceptance. He was perfectly willing to believe that he had dreamed the wolf; to believe Lila's story of boiled chicken and bitter arguments and sleeplessness on Tremont Avenue; and to forget that her first caress had been to bite him on the shoulder, hard enough so that the blood crusting there as he got up and made breakfast might very well be his own. But then he left the coffee perking and went up to the roof to get Grunewald. He found the dog sprawled in a grove of TV antennas, looking more like a goat than ever, with his throat torn out. Farrell had never actually seen an animal with its throat torn out.

The coffeepot was still chuckling when he came back into the apartment, which struck him as very odd. You could have either werewolves or Pyrex nine-cup percolators in the world, but not both, surely. He told Lila, watching her face. She was a small girl, not really pretty, but with good eyes and a lovely mouth, and with a curious sullen gracefulness that had been the first thing to speak to Farrell at the party. When he told her how Grunewald had looked, she shivered all over, once.

"Ugh!" she said, wrinkling her lips back from her neat white teeth. "Oh baby, how awful. Poor Grunewald. Oh, poor Barbara." Barbara was Grunewald's owner.

"Yeah," Farrell said. "Poor Barbara, making her little tapes in Saint-Tropez." He could not look away from Lila's face.

She said, "Wild dogs. Not really wild, I mean, but with owners. You hear about it sometimes, how a pack of them get together and attack children and things, running through the streets. Then they go home and eat their Dog Yummies. The scary thing is that they probably live right around here. Everybody on the block seems to have a dog. God, that's scary. Poor Grunewald."

"They didn't tear him up much," Farrell said. "It must have been just for the fun of it. And the blood. I didn't know dogs killed for the blood. He didn't have any blood left."

The tip of Lila's tongue appeared between her lips, in the unknowing reflex of a fondled cat. As evidence, it wouldn't have

stood up even in old Salem; but Farrell knew the truth then, beyond laziness or rationalization, and went on buttering toast for Lila. Farrell had nothing against werewolves, and he had never liked Grunewald.

He told his friend Ben Kassoy about Lila when they met in the Automat for lunch. He had to shout it over the clicking and rattling all around them, but the people sitting six inches away on either hand never looked up. New Yorkers never eavesdrop. They hear only what they simply cannot help hearing.

Ben said, "I told you about Bronx girls. You better come stay at my place for a few days."

Farrell shook his head. "No, that's silly. I mean, it's only Lila. If she were going to hurt me, she could have done it last night. Besides, it won't happen again for a month. There has to be a full moon."

His friend stared at him. "So what? What's that got to do with anything? You going to go on home as though nothing had happened?"

"Not as though nothing had happened," Farrell said lamely. "The thing is, it's still only Lila, not Lon Chaney or somebody. Look, she goes to her psychiatrist three afternoons a week, and she's got her guitar lesson one night a week, and her pottery class one night, and she cooks eggplant maybe twice a week. She calls her mother every Friday night, and one night a month she turns into a wolf. You see what I'm getting at? It's still Lila, whatever she does, and I just can't get terribly shook about it. A little bit, sure, because what the hell. But I don't know. Anyway, there's no mad rush about it. I'll talk to her when the thing comes up in conversation, just naturally. It's okay."

Ben said, "God damn. You see why nobody has any respect for liberals anymore? Farrell, I know you. You're just scared of hurting her feelings."

"Well, it's that too," Farrell agreed, a little embarrassed. "I hate confrontations. If I break up with her now, she'll think I'm doing it because she's a werewolf. It's awkward, it feels nasty

and middle-class. I should have broken up with her the first time I met her mother, or the second time she served the eggplant. Her mother, boy, there's the real werewolf, there's somebody I'd wear wolfsbane against, that woman. Damn, I wish I hadn't found out. I don't think I've ever found out anything about people that I was the better for knowing."

Ben walked all the way back to the bookstore with him, arguing. It touched Farrell, because Ben hated to walk. Before they parted, Ben suggested, "At least you could try some of that stuff you were talking about, the wolfsbane. There's garlic, too—you put some in a little bag and wear it around your neck. Don't laugh, man. If there's such a thing as werewolves, the other stuff must be real, too. Cold iron, silver, oak, running water—"

"I'm not laughing at you," Farrell said, but he was still grinning. "Lila's shrink says she has a rejection thing, very deep-seated, take us years to break through all that scar tissue. Now if I start walking around wearing amulets and mumbling in Latin every time she looks at me, who knows how far it'll set her back? Listen, I've done some things I'm not proud of, but I don't want to mess with anyone's analysis. That's the sin against God." He sighed and slapped Ben lightly on the arm. "Don't worry about it. We'll work it out, I'll talk to her."

But between that night and the next full moon, he found no good, casual way of bringing the subject up. Admittedly, he did not try as hard as he might have: it was true that he feared confrontations more than he feared werewolves, and he would have found it almost as difficult to talk to Lila about her guitar playing, or her pots, or the political arguments she got into at parties. "The thing is," he said to Ben, "it's sort of one more little weakness not to take advantage of. In a way."

They made love often that month. The smell of Lila flowered in the bedroom, where the smell of the wolf still lingered almost visibly, and both of them were wild, heavy zoo smells, warm and raw and fearful, the sweeter for being savage. Farrell held Lila in his arms and knew what she was, and he was always

frightened; but he would not have let her go if she had turned into a wolf again as he held her. It was a relief to peer at her while she slept and see how stubby and childish her fingernails were, or that the skin around her mouth was rashy because she had been snacking on chocolate. She loved secret sweets, but they always betrayed her.

It's only Lila after all, he would think as he drowsed off. Her mother used to hide the candy, but Lila always found it. Now she's a big girl, neither married nor in graduate school, but living in sin with an Irish musician, and she can have all the candy she wants. What kind of a werewolf is that. Poor Lila, practicing *Who killed Davey Moore? Why did he die?* . . .

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The note said that she would be working late at the magazine, on layout, and might have to be there all night. Farrell put on about four feet of Telemann laced with Django Reinhardt, took down *The Golden Bough*, and settled into a chair by the window. The moon shone in at him, bright and thin and sharp as the lid of a tin can, and it did not seem to move at all as he dozed and woke.

Lila's mother called several times during the night, which was interesting. Lila still picked up her mail and most messages at her old apartment, and her two roommates covered for her when necessary, but Farrell was absolutely certain that her mother knew she was living with him. Farrell was an expert on mothers. Mrs. Braun called him Joe each time she called and that made him wonder, for he knew she hated him. Does she suspect that we share a secret? Ah, poor Lila.

The last time the telephone woke him, it was still dark in the room, but the traffic lights no longer glittered through rings of mist, and the cars made a different sound on the warming pavement. A man was saying clearly in the street, "Well, *I'd shoot'm. I'd shoot'm.*" Farrell let the telephone ring ten times before he picked it up.

"Let me talk to Lila," Mrs. Braun said.

"She isn't here." What if the sun catches her, what if she turns back to herself in front of a cop, or a bus driver, or a couple of nuns going to early Mass? "Lila isn't here, Mrs. Braun."

"I have reason to believe that's not true." The fretful, muscular voice had dropped all pretense of warmth. "I want to talk to Lila."

Farrell was suddenly dry-mouthed and shivering with fury. It was her choice of words that did it. "Well, I have reason to believe you're a suffocating old bitch and a bourgeois Stalinist. How do you like them apples, Mrs. B?" As though his anger had summoned her, the wolf was standing two feet away from him. Her coat was dark and lank with sweat, and yellow saliva was mixed with the blood that strung from her jaws. She looked at Farrell and growled far away in her throat.

"Just a minute," he said. He covered the receiver with his palm. "It's for you," he said to the wolf. "It's your mother." The wolf made a pitiful sound, almost inaudible, and scuffed at the floor. She was plainly exhausted. Mrs. Braun pinged in Farrell's ear like a bug against a lighted window. "What, what? Hello, what is this? Listen, you put Lila on the phone right now. Hello? I want to talk to Lila. I know she's there."

Farrell hung up just as the sun touched a corner of the window. The wolf became Lila. As before, she only made one sound. The phone rang again, and she picked it up without a glance at Farrell. "Bernice?" Lila always called her mother by her first name. "Yes—no, no—yeah, I'm fine. I'm all right, I just forgot to call. No, I'm all right, will you listen? Bernice, there's no law that says you have to get hysterical. Yes, you are." She dropped down on the bed, groping under her pillow for cigarettes. Farrell got up and began to make coffee.

"Well, there was a little trouble," Lila was saying. "See, I went to the zoo, because I couldn't find—Bernice, I know, I *know*, but that was, what, three months ago. The thing is, I didn't think they'd have their horns so soon. Bernice, I had

to, that's all. There'd only been a couple of cats and a—well, sure they chased me, but I—well, Momma, Bernice, what did you want me to do? Just what did you want me to do? You're always so dramatic—why do I shout? I shout because I can't get you to listen to me any other way. You remember what Dr. Schechtman said—what? No, I told you, I just forgot to call. No, that is the reason, that's the real and only reason. Well, whose fault is that? What? Oh, Bernice. Jesus Christ, Bernice. All right, *how* is it Dad's fault?"

She didn't want the coffee, or any breakfast, but she sat at the table in his bathrobe and drank milk greedily. It was the first time he had ever seen her drink milk. Her face was sandy-pale, and her eyes were red. Talking to her mother left her looking as though she had actually gone ten rounds with the woman. Farrell asked, "How long has it been happening?"

"Nine years," Lila said. "Since I hit puberty. First day, cramps; the second day, this. My introduction to womanhood." She snickered and spilled her milk. "I want some more," she said. "Got to get rid of that taste."

"Who knows about it?" he asked. "Pat and Janet?" They were the two girls she had been rooming with.

"God, no. I'd never tell them. I've never told a girl. Bernice knows, of course, and Dr. Schechtman—he's my head doctor. And you now. That's all." Farrell waited. She was a bad liar, and only did it to heighten the effect of the truth. "Well, there was Mickey," she said. "The guy I told you about the first night, you remember? It doesn't matter. He's an acidhead in Vancouver, of all places. He'll never tell anybody."

He thought: I wonder if any girl has ever talked about me in that sort of voice. I doubt it, offhand. Lila said, "It wasn't too hard to keep it a secret. I missed a lot of things. Like I never could go to the riding camp, and I still want to. And the senior play, when I was in high school. They picked me to play the girl in *Liliom*, but then they changed the evening, and I had to say I was sick. And the winter's bad, because the sun sets so

early. But actually, it's been a lot less trouble than my goddamn allergies." She made a laugh, but Farrell did not respond.

"Dr. Schechtman says it's a sex thing," she offered. "He says it'll take years and years to cure it. Bernice thinks I should go to someone else, but I don't want to be one of those women who runs around changing shrinks like hair colors. Pat went through five of them in a month one time. Joe, I wish you'd say something. Or just go away."

"Is it only dogs?" he asked. Lila's face did not change, but her chair rattled, and the milk went over again. Farrell said, "Answer me. Do you only kill dogs, and cats, and zoo animals?"

The tears began to come, heavy and slow, bright as knives in the morning sunlight. She could not look at him; and when she tried to speak she could only make creaking, cartilaginous sounds in her throat. "*You* don't know," she whispered at last. "You don't have any idea what it's like."

"That's true," he answered. He was always very fair about that particular point.

He took her hand, and then she really began to cry. Her sobs were horrible to hear, much more frightening to Farrell than any wolf noises. When he held her, she rolled in his arms like a stranded ship with the waves slamming into her. I always get the criers, he thought sadly. My girls always cry, sooner or later. But never for me.

"Don't leave me!" she wept. "I don't know why I came to live with you—I knew it wouldn't work—but don't leave me! There's just Bernice and Dr. Schechtman, and it's so lonely. I want somebody else, I get so lonely. Don't leave me, Joe. I love you, Joe. I love you."

She was patting his face as though she were blind. Farrell stroked her hair and kneaded the back of her neck, wishing that her mother would call again. He felt skilled and weary, and without desire. I'm doing it again, he thought. "I love you," Lila said. And he answered her, thinking, I'm doing it again. That's the great advantage of making the same mistake a lot of

times. You come to know it, and you can study it and get inside it, really make it yours. It's the same good old mistake, except this time the girl's hang-up is different. But it's the same thing. I'm doing it again.

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The building superintendent was thirty or fifty: dark, thin, quick, and shivering. A Lithuanian or a Latvian, he spoke very little English. He smelled of black friction tape and stale water, and he was strong in the twisting way that a small, lean animal is strong. His eyes were almost purple, and they bulged a little, straining out—the terrible eyes of a herald angel stricken dumb. He roamed the basement all day, banging on pipes and taking the elevator apart.

The superintendent met Lila only a few hours after Farrell did; on that first night, when she came home with him. At the sight of her the little man jumped back, dropping the two-legged chair he was carrying. He promptly fell over it, and did not try to get up, but cowered there, clucking and gulping, trying to cross himself and make the sign of the horns at the same time. Farrell started to help him, but he screamed. They could hardly hear the sound.

It would have been merely funny and embarrassing, except for the fact that Lila was equally frightened of the superintendent, from that moment. She would not go down to the basement for any reason, nor would she enter or leave the house until she was satisfied that he was nowhere near. Farrell had thought then that she took the superintendent for a lunatic.

"I don't know how he knows," he said to Ben. "I guess if you believe in werewolves and vampires, you probably recognize them right away. I don't believe in them at all, and I live with one."

He lived with Lila all through the autumn and the winter. They went out together and came home, and her cooking improved slightly, and she gave up the guitar and got a kitten

named Theodora. Sometimes she wept, but not often. She turned out not to be a real crier.

She told Dr. Schechtman about Farrell, and he said that it would probably be a very beneficial relationship for her. It wasn't, but it wasn't a particularly bad one either. Their lovemaking was usually good, though it bothered Farrell to suspect that it was the sense and smell of the Other that excited him. For the rest, they came near being friends. Farrell had known that he did not love Lila before he found out that she was a werewolf, and this made him feel a great deal easier about being bored with her.

"It'll break up by itself in the spring," he said, "like ice."

Ben asked, "What if it doesn't?" They were having lunch in the Automat again. "What'll you do if it just goes on?"

"It's not that easy." Farrell looked away from his friend and began to explore the mysterious, swampy innards of his beef pie. He said, "The trouble is that I know her. That was the real mistake. You shouldn't get to know people if you know you're not going to stay with them, one way or another. It's all right if you come and go in ignorance, but you shouldn't know them."

A week or so before the full moon, she would start to become nervous and strident, and this would continue until the day preceding her transformation. On that day, she was invariably loving, in the tender, desperate manner of someone who is going away; but the next day would see her silent, speaking only when she had to. She always had a cold on the last day, and looked grey and patchy and sick, but she usually went to work anyway.

Farrell was sure, though she never talked about it, that the change into wolf shape was actually peaceful for her, though the returning hurt. Just before moonrise she would take off her clothes and take the pins out of her hair, and stand waiting. Farrell never managed not to close his eyes when she dropped heavily down on all fours; but there was a moment before that when her face would grow a look that he never saw at any other

time, except when they were making love. Each time he saw it, it struck him as a look of wondrous joy at not being Lila anymore.

"See, I know her," he tried to explain to Ben. "She only likes to go to color movies, because wolves can't see color. She can't stand the Modern Jazz Quartet, but that's all she plays the first couple of days afterward. Stupid things like that. Never gets high at parties, because she's afraid she'll start talking. It's hard to walk away, that's all. Taking what I know with me."

Ben asked, "Is she still scared of the super?"

"Oh, God," Farrell said. "She got his dog last time. It was a Dalmatian—good-looking animal. She didn't know it was his. He doesn't hide when he sees her now, he just gives her a look like a stake through the heart. That man is a really classy hater, a natural. I'm scared of him myself." He stood up and began to pull on his overcoat. "I wish he'd get turned on to her mother. Get some practical use out of him. Did I tell you she wants me to call her Bernice?"

Ben said, "Farrell, if I were you, I'd leave the country. I would."

They went out into the February drizzle that sniffled back and forth between snow and rain. Farrell did not speak until they reached the corner where he turned towards the bookstore. Then he said very softly, "Damn, you have to be so careful. Who wants to know what people turn into?"

May came, and a night when Lila once again stood naked at the window, waiting for the moon. Farrell fussed with dishes and garbage bags and fed the cat. These moments were always awkward. He had just asked her, "You want to save what's left of the rice?" when the telephone rang.

It was Lila's mother. She called two and three times a week now. "This is Bernice. How's my Irisher this evening?"

"I'm fine, Bernice," Farrell said. Lila suddenly threw back her head and drew a heavy, whining breath. The cat hissed silently and ran into the bathroom.

"I called to inveigle you two uptown this Friday," Mrs. Braun said. "A couple of old friends are coming over, and I know if I

don't get some young people in we'll just sit around and talk about what went wrong with the Progressive Party. The Old Left. So if you could sort of sweet-talk our girl into spending an evening in Squaresville—"

"I'll have to check with Lila." She's *doing* it, he thought, that terrible woman. Every time I talk to her, I sound married. I see what she's doing, but she goes right ahead anyway. He said, "I'll talk to her in the morning." Lila struggled in the moonlight, between dancing and drowning. "Oh," Mrs. Braun said. "Yes, of course. Have her call me back." She sighed. "It's such a comfort to me to know you're there. Ask her if I should fix a fondue?"

Lila made a handsome wolf: tall and broad-chested for a female, moving as easily as water sliding over stone. Her coat was dark brown, showing red in the proper light, and there were white places on her breast. She had pale green eyes, the color of the sky when a hurricane is coming. Usually she was gone as soon as the changing was over, for she never cared for him to see her in her wolf form. But tonight she came slowly towards him, walking in a strange way, with her hindquarters almost dragging. She was making a high, soft sound, and her eyes were not focusing on him.

"What is it?" he asked foolishly. The wolf whined and skulked under the table, rubbing against his leg. Then she lay on her belly and rolled and as she did so the sound grew in her throat until it became an odd, sad, thin cry; not a hunting howl, but a shiver of longing turned into breath. "Jesus, don't do that!" Farrell gasped. But she sat up and howled again, and a dog answered her from somewhere near the river. She wagged her tail and whimpered.

Farrell said, "The super'll be up here in two minutes flat. What's the matter with you?" He heard footsteps and low frightened voices in the apartment above them. Another dog howled, this one nearby, and the wolf wriggled a little way towards the window on her haunches, like a baby, scooting. She looked at

him over her shoulder, shuddering violently. On an impulse, he picked up the phone and called her mother.

Watching the wolf as she rocked and slithered and moaned, he described her actions to Mrs. Braun. "I've never seen her like this," he said. "I don't know what's the matter with her."

"Oh, my God," Mrs. Braun whispered. She told him.

When he was silent, she began to speak very rapidly. "It hasn't happened for such a long time. Schechtman gives her pills, but she must have run out and forgotten—she's always been like that, since she was little. All the Thermos bottles she used to leave on the school bus, and every week her piano music—"

"I wish you'd told me before," he said. He was edging very cautiously towards the open window. The pupils of the wolf's eyes were pulsing with her quick breaths.

"It isn't a thing you tell people!" Lila's mother wailed in his ear. "How do you think it was for me when she brought her first little boyfriend—" Farrell dropped the phone and sprang for the window. He had the inside track, and he might have made it, but she turned her head and snarled so wildly that he fell back. When he reached the window, she was already two fire-escape landings below, and there was eager yelping waiting for her in the street.

Dangling and turning just above the floor, Mrs. Braun heard Farrell's distant yell, followed immediately by a heavy thumping on the door. A strange, tattered voice was shouting unintelligibly beyond the knocking. Footsteps crashed by the receiver and the door opened.

"My dog, my dog!" the strange voice mourned. "My dog, my dog, my dog!"

"I'm sorry about your dog," Farrell said. "Look, please go away. I've got work to do."

"I got work," the voice said. "I know my work." It climbed and spilled into another language, out of which English words jutted like broken bones. "Where is she? Where is she? She kill my dog."

“She’s not here.” Farrell’s own voice changed on the last word. It seemed a long time before he said, “You’d better put that away.”

Mrs. Braun heard the howl as clearly as though the wolf were running beneath her own window: lonely and insatiable, with a kind of gasping laughter in it. The other voice began to scream. Mrs. Braun caught the phrase *silver bullet* several times. The door slammed; then opened and slammed again.

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Farrell was the only man of his own acquaintance who was able to play back his dreams while he was having them: to stop them in mid-flight, no matter how fearful they might be—or how lovely—and run them over and over studying them in his sleep, until the most terrifying reel became at once utterly harmless and unbearably familiar. This night that he spent running after Lila was like that.

He would find them congregated under the marquee of an apartment house, or romping around the moonscape of a construction site: ten or fifteen males of all races, creeds, colors, and previous conditions of servitude; whining and yapping, pissing against tires, inhaling indiscriminately each other and the lean, grinning bitch they surrounded. She frightened them, for she growled more wickedly than coyness demanded, and where she snapped, even in play, bone showed. Still they tumbled on her and over her, biting her neck and ears in their turn; and she snarled but she did not run away.

Never, at least, until Farrell came charging upon them, shrieking like any cuckold, kicking at the snuffing lovers. Then she would turn and race off into the spring dark, with her thin, dreamy howl floating behind her like the train of a smoky gown. The dogs followed, and so did Farrell, calling and cursing. They always lost him quickly, that jubilant marriage procession, leaving him stumbling down rusty iron ladders into places where he fell over garbage cans. Yet he would come upon them

as inevitably in time, loping along Broadway or trotting across Columbus Avenue towards the Park; he would hear them in the tennis courts near the river, breaking down the nets over Lila and her moment's Ares. There were dozens of them now, coming from all directions. They stank of their joy, and he threw stones at them and shouted, and they ran.

And the wolf ran at their head, on sidewalks and on wet grass; her tail waving contentedly, but her eyes still hungry, and her howl growing ever more warning than wistful. Farrell knew that she must have blood before sunrise, and that it was both useless and dangerous to follow her. But the night wound and unwound itself, and he knew the same things over and over, and ran down the same streets, and saw the same couples walk wide of him, thinking he was drunk.

Mrs. Braun kept leaping out of a taxi that pulled up next to him; usually at corners where the dogs had just piled by, knocking over the crates stacked in market doorways and spilling the newspapers at the subway kiosks. Standing in broccoli, in black taffeta, with a front like a ferry-boat—yet as lean in the hips as her wolf-daughter—with her plum-colored hair all loose, one arm lifted, and her orange mouth pursed in a bellow, she was no longer Bernice but a wronged fertility goddess getting set to blast the harvest. “We’ve got to split up!” she would roar at Farrell, and each time it sounded like a sound idea. Yet he looked for her whenever he lost Lila’s trail, because she never did.

The superintendent kept turning up too, darting after Farrell out of alleys or cellar entrances, or popping from the freight elevators that load through the sidewalk. Farrell would hear his numberless passkeys clicking on the flat piece of wood tucked into his belt.

“You see her? You see her, the wolf, kill my dog?” Under the fat, ugly moon, the Army .45 glittered and trembled like his own mad eyes.

“Mark with a cross.” He would pat the barrel of his gun and

shake it under Farrell's nose like a maraca. "Mark with a cross, bless by a priest. Three silver bullets. She kill my dog."

Lila's voice would come sailing to them then, from up in Harlem or away near Lincoln Center, and the little man would whirl and dash down into the earth, disappearing into the crack between two slabs of sidewalk. Farrell understood quite clearly that the superintendent was hunting Lila underground, using the keys that only superintendents have to take elevators down to the black sub-sub-basements, far below the bicycle rooms and the wet, shaking laundry rooms, and below the furnace rooms, below the passages walled with electricity meters and roofed with burly steam pipes; down to the realms where the great dim water mains roll like whales, and the gas lines hump and preen, down where the roots of the apartment houses fade together, and so along under the city, scrabbling through secret ways with silver bullets, and his keys rapping against the piece of wood. He never saw Lila, but he was never very far behind her.

Cutting across parking lots, pole-vaulting between locked bumpers, edging and dancing his way through fluorescent gaggles of haughty children; leaping uptown like a salmon against the current of the theatre crowds; walking quickly past the random killing faces that floated down the night tide like unexploded mines, and especially avoiding the crazy faces that wanted to tell him what it was like to be crazy—so Farrell pursued Lila Braun, of Tremont Avenue and CCNY, in the city all night long. Nobody offered to help him, or tried to head off the dangerous-looking bitch bounding along with the delirious gaggle of admirers streaming after her; but then, the dogs had to fight through the same clenched legs and vengeful bodies that Farrell did. The crowds slowed Lila down, but he felt relieved whenever she turned towards the emptier streets. *She must have blood soon, somewhere.*

Farrell's dreams eventually lost their clear edge after he played them back a certain number of times, and so it was with

the night. The full moon skidded down the sky, thinning like a tatter of butter in a skillet, and remembered scenes began to fold sloppily into each other. The sound of Lila and the dogs grew fainter whichever way he followed. Mrs. Braun blinked on and off at longer intervals; and in dark doorways and under subway gratings, the superintendent burned like a corposant, making the barrel of his pistol run rainbow. At last he lost Lila for good, and with that it seemed that he woke.

It was still night, but not dark, and he was walking slowly home on Riverside Drive through a cool, grainy fog. The moon had set, but the river was strangely bright: glittering grey as far up as the Bridge, where headlights left shiny, wet paths like snails. There was no one else on the street. "Dumb broad," he said aloud. "The hell with it. She wants to mess around, let her mess around." He wondered whether werewolves could have cubs, and what sort of cubs they might be. Lila must have turned on the dogs by now, for the blood. Poor dogs, he thought. They were all so dirty and innocent and happy with her.

"A moral lesson for all of us," he announced sententiously. "Don't fool with strange, eager ladies, they'll kill you." He was a little hysterical. Then, two blocks ahead of him, he saw the gaunt shape in the grey light of the river; alone now, and hurrying. Farrell did not call to her, but as soon as he began to run, the wolf wheeled and faced him. Even at that distance, her eyes were stained and streaked and wild. She showed all the teeth on one side of her mouth, and she growled like fire.

Farrell trotted steadily towards her, crying, "Go home, go home! Lila, you dummy, get on home, it's morning!" She growled terribly, but when Farrell was less than a block away she turned again and dashed across the street, heading for West End Avenue. Farrell said, "Good girl, that's it," and limped after her.

In the hours before sunrise on West End Avenue, many people came out to walk their dogs. Farrell had done it often enough with poor Grunewald to know many of the dawn walkers by sight, and some to talk to. A fair number of them were

whores and homosexuals, both of whom always seem to have dogs in New York. Quietly, almost always alone, they drifted up and down the Nineties, piloted by their small, fussy beasts, but moving in a kind of fugitive truce with the city and the night that was ending. Farrell sometimes fancied that they were all asleep, and that this hour was the only true rest they ever got.

He recognized Robie by his two dogs, Scone and Crumpet. Robie lived in the apartment directly below Farrell's, usually unhappily. The dogs were horrifying little homebrews of Chihuahua and Yorkshire terrier, but Robie loved them.

Crumpet, the male, saw Lila first. He gave a delighted yap of welcome and proposition (according to Robie, Scone bored him, and he liked big girls anyway) and sprang to meet her, yanking his leash through Robie's slack hand. The wolf was almost upon him before he realized his fatal misunderstanding and scuttled desperately in retreat, meowing with utter terror.

Robie wailed, and Farrell ran as fast as he could, but Lila knocked Crumpet off his feet and slashed his throat while he was still in the air. Then she crouched on the body, nuzzling it in a dreadful way.

Robie actually came within a step of leaping upon Lila and trying to drag her away from his dead dog. Instead, he turned on Farrell as he came panting up, and began hitting him with a good deal of strength and accuracy. "Damn you, damn you!" he sobbed. Little Scone ran away around the corner, screaming like a mandrake.

Farrell put up his arms and went with the punches, all the while yelling at Lila until his voice ripped. But the blood frenzy had her, and Farrell never imagined what she must be like at those times. Somehow she had spared the dogs who had loved her all night, but she was nothing but thirst now. She pushed and kneaded Crumpet's body as though she were nursing.

All along the avenue, the morning dogs were barking like trumpets. Farrell ducked away from Robie's soft fists and saw them coming; tripping over their trailing leashes, running too

fast for their stubby legs. They were small, spoiled beasts, most of them, overweight and shortwinded, and many were not young. Their owners cried unmanly pet names after them, but they waddled gallantly towards their deaths, barking promises far bigger than themselves, and none of them looked back.

She looked up with her muzzle red to the eyes. The dogs did falter then, for they knew murder when they smelled it, and even their silly, nearsighted eyes understood vaguely what creature faced them. But they knew the smell of love too, and they were all gentlemen.

She killed the first two to reach her—a spitz and a cocker spaniel—with two snaps of her jaws. But before she could settle down to her meal, three Pokes were scrambling up to her, though they would have had to stand on each other's shoulders. Lila whirled without a sound, and they fell away, rolling and yelling but unhurt. As soon as she turned, the Pokes were at her again, joined now by a couple of valiant poodles. Lila got one of the poodles when she turned again. Robie had stopped beating on Farrell, and was leaning against a traffic light, being sick. But other people were running up now: a middle-aged black man, crying; a plump youth in a plastic car coat and bedroom slippers, who kept whimpering, "Oh God, she's eating them, look at her, she's really eating them!"; two lean, ageless girls in slacks, both with foamy beige hair. They all called wildly to their unheeding dogs, and they all grabbed at Farrell and shouted in his face. Cars began to stop.

The sky was thin and cool, rising pale gold, but Lila paid no attention to it. She was ramping under the swarm of little dogs; rearing and spinning in circles, snarling blood. The dogs were terrified and bewildered, but they never swerved from their labor. The smell of love told them that they were welcome, however ungraciously she seemed to receive them. Lila shook herself, and a pair of squealing dachshunds, hobbled in a double harness, tumbled across the sidewalk to end at Farrell's feet. They scrambled up and immediately towed themselves back into

the maelstrom. Lila bit one of them almost in half, but the other dachshund went on trying to climb her hindquarters, dragging his ripped comrade with him. Farrell began to laugh.

The black man said, "You think it's funny?" and hit him. Farrell sat down, still laughing. The man stood over him, embarrassed, offering Farrell his handkerchief. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that," he said. "But your dog killed my dog."

"She isn't my dog," Farrell said. He moved to let a man pass between them, and then saw that it was the superintendent, holding his pistol with both hands. Nobody noticed him until he fired; but Farrell pushed one of the foamy-haired girls, and she stumbled against the superintendent as the gun went off. The silver bullet broke a window in a parked car.

The superintendent fired again while the echoes of the first shot were still clapping back and forth between the houses. A Pomeranian screamed that time, and a woman cried out, "Oh my God, he shot Borgy!" But the crowd was crumbling away, breaking into its individual components like pills on television. The watching cars had sped off at the sight of the gun, and the faces that had been peering down from windows disappeared. Except for Farrell, the few people who remained were scattered halfway down the block. The sky was brightening swiftly now.

"For God's sake, don't let him!" the same woman called from the shelter of a doorway. But two men made shushing gestures at her, saying, "It's all right, he knows how to use that thing. Go ahead, buddy."

The shots had at last frightened the little dogs away from Lila. She crouched among the twitching splotches of fur, with her muzzle wrinkled back and her eyes more black than green. Farrell saw a plaid rag that had been a dog jacket protruding from under her body. The superintendent stooped and squinted over the gun barrel, aiming with grotesque care, while the men cried to him to shoot. He was too far from the werewolf for her to reach him before he fired the last silver bullet, though he would surely die before she died. His lips were moving as he took aim.

Two long steps would have brought Farrell up behind the superintendent. Later he told himself that he had been afraid of the pistol, because that was easier than remembering how he had felt when he looked at Lila. Her tongue never stopped lapping around her dark jaws; and even as she set herself to spring, she lifted a bloody paw to her mouth. Farrell thought of her padding in the bedroom, breathing on his face. The superintendent grunted and Farrell closed his eyes. Yet even then he expected to find himself doing something.

Then he heard Mrs. Braun's unmistakable voice. "*Don't you dare!*" She was standing between Lila and the superintendent: one shoe gone, and the heel off the other one; her knit dress torn at the shoulder, and her face tired and smudgy. But she pointed a finger at the startled superintendent, and he stepped quickly back, as though she had a pistol, too.

"Lady, that's a wolf," he protested nervously. "Lady, you please get, get out of the way. That's a wolf, I go shoot her now."

"I want to see your license for that gun." Mrs. Braun held out her hand. The superintendent blinked at her, muttering in despair. She said, "Do you know that you can be sent to prison for twenty years for carrying a concealed weapon in this state? Do you know what the fine is for having a gun without a license? The fine is Five. Thousand. Dollars." The men down the street were shouting at her, but she swung around to face the creature snarling among the little dead dogs.

"Come on, Lila," she said. "Come on home with Bernice. I'll make tea and we'll talk. It's been a long time since we've really talked, you know? We used to have nice long talks when you were little, but we don't anymore." The wolf had stopped growling, but she was crouching even lower, and her ears were still flat against her head. Mrs. Braun said, "Come on, baby. Listen, I know what—you'll call in sick at the office and stay for a few days. You'll get a good rest, and maybe we'll even look around a little for a new doctor, what do you say? Schechtman hasn't done a thing for you, I never liked him. Come on home,

honey. Momma's here, Bernice knows." She took a step towards the silent wolf, holding out her hand.

The superintendent gave a desperate, wordless cry and pumped forward, clumsily shoving Mrs. Braun to one side. He leveled the pistol point-blank, wailing, "My dog, my dog!" Lila was in the air when the gun went off, and her shadow sprang after her, for the sun had risen. She crumpled down across a couple of dead Pekes. Their blood dabbled her breasts and her pale throat.

Mrs. Braun screamed like a lunch whistle. She knocked the superintendent into the street and sprawled over Lila, hiding her completely from Farrell's sight. "Lila, Lila," she keened to her daughter, "poor baby, you never had a chance. He killed you because you were different, the way they kill everything different." Farrell approached her and stooped down, but she pushed him against a wall without looking up. "Lila, Lila, poor baby, poor darling, maybe it's better, maybe you're happy now. You never had a chance, poor Lila."

The dog owners were edging slowly back and the surviving dogs were running to them. The superintendent squatted on the curb with his head in his arms. A wary, muffled voice said, "For God's sake, Bernice, would you get up off me? You don't have to stop yelling, just get off."

When she stood up, the cars began to stop in the street again. It made it very difficult for the police to get through. Nobody pressed charges, because there was no one to lodge them against. The killer dog—or wolf, as some insisted—was gone; and if she had an owner, he could not be found. As for the people who had actually seen the wolf turn into a young girl when the sunlight touched her; most of them managed not to have seen it, though they never really forgot. There were a few who knew quite well what they had seen, and never forgot it either, but they never said anything. They did, however, chip in to pay the superintendent's fine for possessing an unlicensed handgun. Farrell gave what he could.

Lila vanished out of Farrell's life before sunset. She did not go uptown with her mother, but packed her things and went to stay with friends in the Village. Later he heard that she was living on Christopher Street; and later still, that she had moved to Berkeley and gone back to school. He never saw her again.

"It had to be like that," he told Ben once. "We got to know too much about each other. See, there's another side to knowing. She couldn't look at me."

"You mean because you saw her with all those dogs? Or because she knew you'd have let that little nut shoot her?" Farrell shook his head.

"It was that, I guess, but it was more something else, something I know. When she sprang, just as he shot at her that last time, she wasn't leaping at him. She was going straight for her mother. She'd have got her too, if it hadn't been sunrise."

Ben whistled softly. "I wonder if her old lady knows."

"Bernice knows everything about Lila," Farrell said.

Mrs. Braun called him nearly two years later to tell him that Lila was getting married. It must have cost her a good deal of money and ingenuity to find him (where Farrell was living then, the telephone line was open for four hours a day), but he knew by the spitefulness in the static that she considered it money well spent.

"He's at Stanford," she crackled. "A research psychologist. They're going to Japan for their honeymoon."

"That's fine," Farrell said. "I'm really happy for her, Bernice." He hesitated before he asked, "Does he know about Lila? I mean, about what happens—?"

"Does he know?" she cried. "He's proud of it—he thinks it's wonderful! It's his field!"

"That's great. That's fine. Goodbye, Bernice. I really am glad."

And he was glad, and a little wistful, thinking about it. The girl he was living with here had a really strange hang-up.



THE WEREWOLF OF CAMELOT

Darrell Schweitzer

Darrell Schweitzer is the author of the novels *The Mask of the Sorcerer*, *The Shattered Goddess*, and *The White Isle*, as well as almost three hundred published short stories. His collections include *Refugees from an Imaginary Country*, *Transients*, *Tom O'Bedlam's Night Out*, *Necromancies and Netherworlds* (with Jason Van Hollander), *Nightscares*, *The Great World and the Small*, and *We Are All Legends*. Schweitzer is a former editor of *Weird Tales* magazine, for which he won a World Fantasy Award, and is currently working on a series of anthology projects, the most recent of which, *Full Moon City*, is, coincidentally, a book of urban werewolf stories. He is also known as an interviewer, critic, and the author of books on H. P. Lovecraft and Lord Dunsany.

Schweitzer, like writers from the twelfth century onward, finds the story of Arthur and the doom of Camelot quite accommodating to the werewolf theme: "The Matter of Britain is multifaceted enough to include just about anything that existed in western folklore in the Middle Ages. An Arthurian vampire might be hard to make plausible, since the vampire myth is much more eastern European, but were-creatures and shapechangers fit in fine. And the interplay between man and beast is quite suitable to the Arthurian story, since Arthur and Camelot always seem to be right at the edge of the magical world of deep forests and unknown or haunted places."



WHEN HE CRAWLED OUT of the dark and snowy woods into the firelight on all fours, the uncanny glow in his eyes faded and he seemed somewhat more human, though by his expression, by the way he held himself and the way he moved, I could see that here was one for whom humanity was a nearly forgotten grace, now resumed uncertainly after a long time.

“Father, forgive me, for I have sinned.”

He was a large, gaunt, excessively hairy man with a strong stench about him, naked but for some kind of skin wrapped around his waist, and when he paused and sniffed the fire, as a dog might, he did not seem human at all, but when he spoke, I remembered myself, I who had been willing to risk martyrdom from marauding Saxons by lighting this fire to avoid freezing to death. Now, when the hairy man spoke, I called to mind Christian charity and wrapped my cloak around him.

Then we two sat side by side, shivering by my pathetic little fire, in the dark winter’s night of a fallen world, and he asked me again, “Can you forgive sins?”

This didn’t seem the time to explain that while I, as a priest, could *absolve*, the actual forgiveness was between the sinner and God. With the churches and villages of the land in flames, the barbarians everywhere, and our own deaths as likely as not to come on the morrow, it didn’t seem worth bothering with theological niceties.

I offered to hear his confession.

Instead, he told me this story. I choose to think that it does not constitute the actual confession. Therefore I can repeat it.

“I was filled with pride, in the old days,” he said, “though I had no right to be. In the old days, when the King was alive. Do you remember that, Father? Do you remember Camelot?”

“Yes,” I said softly.

For a while, then, he said nothing, just listened to the wind, to the ice snapping off branches and rattling to the ground, as if he were gazing deeper into memory than I did or could. It seemed a struggle for him to go on speaking, as if he'd exhausted his store of words after a few rehearsed lines.

"Camelot," I prompted. "You were remembering Camelot."

"I was trying to remember my own name," he said. "Always a good place to start. But when I started, I had no name, for I was nobody. I do not remember being born. I do not remember having any parents. I was merely Hey You or Get Out of the Way or Brat, or, maybe just No One—a barefoot and ragged slave of a slave of a slave, though after some time I found my way into the company of a boy named Giles, who was squire to a knight whose name I can't recall. This Giles had acquired me in a dice game along with a dog and a pair of shoes, and I think he regarded me as the least of his winnings. But his master the knight was a kindly man, and bade him treat me as if I were his little brother, which Giles reluctantly did, at least until I started to grow; for soon I towered over Giles and was no longer little. Together we served our knight, and shared his adventures, and went with him from town to town, where, because it was mostly a peaceful time, he devoted himself more to tourneys than to war, and won many prizes. Giles and I both grew used to this life, though he was the merry one and I the solemn, sullen companion that the young women drew away from and people whispered about when they thought I couldn't hear. So things went on until one evening on the road our knight caught a fever out of the damp air, slid down off his horse to relieve himself and couldn't get back up, and by morning he was dead.

"That morning, more stunned than weeping, Giles and I just sat there, on either side of the corpse of our master, wondering what we should do next, how we should live; and what followed was his idea at first—for his name echoed his nature and he should have been called Guileful Giles. Noting that I was as big as a grown man, where he was not, measuring by his glance

my height and the length of my arm compared with our late master, it was *he* who took the dead knight's helmet and put it on my head, but it was my sin to stand there and let him strap the armor on me piece by piece, and put our master's sword in my hand, and in particular it was my wickedness to listen to him and laugh a little with him as he slapped the visor closed.

"We did that, with our poor knight dead at our feet, hardly cold.

"Who's to know?" Giles said.

"Who indeed? I had been taken for an idiot many times, maybe not wrongfully. That was how, disguised, I came, not to some country fair in some crossroads village, but to Camelot itself, in the days of King Arthur: a place of splendid towers, packed with richly clad people. I was terrified. I wanted to run and hide. I was sure we'd gotten ourselves into more than we could handle, but Giles, who led my horse, just said, 'Leave it to me, don't worry, you'll be great' the way the Devil says 'It will work out fine, trust me' when he asks you to sign away your soul.

"The crowd pressed around us, nobles and commoners alike, and with many genuine knights we found ourselves before the King and the famous Queen Guenevere, who sat side by side on their thrones beneath a canopy. The other knights were announced, one by one, but when my turn came, there was only confusion. The heralds didn't know who I was.

"Quickly Giles interjected, 'He can't say his name.'

"Has he no voice?" asked the King.

"It's a vow.'

"Now the Queen smiled, half-hiding her laughter behind a fan she held. 'A knight unknown, on a mysterious quest, whose name may not be revealed because of the vow he has sworn to God, until some condition is fulfilled and some destiny is played out—'

"Giles bowed low and said, 'Yes, something like that.'

"I could tell that he hadn't thought this out very well either, and that he was not as clever by half as he'd fancied himself

to be. I wanted to scream that I was a fraud, that I was a fool, that I was totally inadequate. I looked around me in awe, at the mighty battlements of Camelot, at the heroes in armor all around me, all the famous knights, and there, seated slightly below and behind the King, was an old man with a white beard, clad in a dark robe, none other than the enchanter Merlin. I could not believe for an instant that I could impersonate my way in this company and no one would ‘ever know,’ as Giles would have me believe. I felt naked before them all.

“Meanwhile he was announcing that in the fulfillment of my vow I would challenge the King himself to combat, which of course meant that every knight in his court would be honor-bound to fight me first, to protect the King’s honor . . . you know how that works. I thought I did. I could only wonder if Guileful Giles hadn’t become possessed by a devil, or gone completely out of his mind, because, sure, we had helped our knight practice, and we’d seen any number of tourneys in our time, but I wasn’t actually that *good*, and here were the greatest fighters in all the world. I wanted to scream, ‘*Stop! Stop! This is crazy!*’ but I couldn’t. The vow, you know.

“It was over quickly enough. The first to take up the challenge was none other than Lancelot, who *was* the greatest fighter in the world. We were both given lances. In an instant, I was off my horse and on my rump in the mud, before the splinters could even rain down on me, *clank, clank, clank* on my visored face. *Then* came the swords, or *his* sword anyway. Mine went flying out of my hand, and then I was flat on the ground with the front of my helmet bashed in, and vow or no vow I tried to speak, but all that came out was a high-pitched howl. He kicked me a few times while everybody else was laughing, even the King and Queen; and Lancelot said, ‘Your Majesties, I am dishonored. I thought to fight a man, at least, not some whining cur!’

“Merlin knelt over me. He alone remained grave in his manner. He, with his own hands, stripped off my armor and tossed it aside piece by piece, and as he did I felt some power of

magic flow out of his hands into me. My senses were confused. I could not say which was up and which was down. I seemed to be floating and falling at the same time. I tried to cry out, but there came only barks and grunts. I felt as if my body were burning, as if all my bones were breaking at once; and then at last I was revealed before them all, lying on my back with my limbs in the air, even my clothing gone, but not naked, for I was covered with fur and had been transformed into an enormous wolf, as long in its body as I had been tall as a man.

“Now some of the ladies screamed—though the Queen did not; she looked on intently, her fan motionless beside her face—and the knights all leapt to their feet, with swords drawn, but before anyone else could come near Lancelot announced that he would kill the beast. This was indeed a great wonder, that a wolf had come to the tourney wearing armor like a man, but now the deception was revealed and Lancelot would put an end to it.

“*Where* was that vile rascal Giles who had gotten me into this? He seemed to have disappeared. I tried to twist around, to get onto my feet, but Merlin touched me again, and I felt a coldness, and my body fell down limp.

“Lancelot raised his sword to strike, but Merlin held up his hand and said, ‘This creature will not harm you.’ And to Queen Guenevere he said, ‘You are correct, My Lady. Some mysterious destiny is indeed being worked out here.’

“As for what this destiny might be, I had no time to speculate. As soon as Merlin took his hand off me, the paralysis of my limbs was gone, and I twisted around onto my four feet and *ran* through the crowd, frightening horses, overturning carts, scattering knight and burgher, lord and dame, not to mention the grubby, barefoot beggar children among whom I had once numbered; and before anyone could stop me I was out of Camelot and racing across the fields with all my strength, howling in my loud, doleful voice, scattering sheep before me but touching them not; until I came into the deep forest; and still I ran, into

the darkness beneath the great boughs, deeper, deeper, like a fish seeking the depths of the sea, hoping to leave all the bright human world behind forever.”

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Now the teller, whom I can perhaps call in Latin *Lupus Nemo*, paused in his tale, as if, again, he could remember no more of it and knew no other words to speak. The wind blew. Ice rattled down through the branches.

At last he said, “If I lost my reason entirely, I wouldn’t be able to commit sins, would I?” The way he looked at me then, he seemed to be pleading.

I let out a sigh. “Indeed. Without reason there can be no will, without free will, there can be no sin. You have to be able to choose.”

“Yet we all inherited the sin of Adam. I didn’t choose that.”

“But Adam did,” I said, then restrained myself, for this was indeed no time for learned debate. Just then, quoting the Church Fathers would have made about as much sense as howling at the Moon.

And it was a dark night. I could not see the Moon.

After a while, he resumed his story.

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“I don’t entirely know what happened after that. A beast does not think or remember the way a man does. A beast lives *now*. Its world is one of smell and touch and sound. What it remembers are more reactions than thoughts, like the dread of fire. The beast does not think about fire, but when it encounters fire, it is afraid without thinking.

“I ran far, far into the unmapped forest, where the trees closed over me like waves of a green sea. I buried myself in earth and leaves when I slept, trying to drive away those terrifying dreams I still had, the dreams of being a man. Sometimes dark shapes loomed over me, that might have been spirits, or even old, half-forgotten forest gods, but when I awoke, they drew away.

Yes, I was the terror of the woodlands, and many creatures fled before me. Some died in my jaws. Ordinary wolves could not stand before me, and scattered at my approach. Even the great bear turned aside. But I alone of all of them bore the memories of mankind, which we all feared. I remembered vanity and treachery and humiliation. I could almost form the thought, almost bring to mind the face and name of Guileful Giles, and when I did I howled for his blood, for I hated him. I didn't quite know why. Nor did I know the ways of the forest, the secrets of the beasts which are never revealed to humans. For the beasts feared me, not because I was huge and fierce, but because I had the stink of humanity on me. I was an exile from both worlds, truly a wretched creature.

"Then Merlin called me back.

"I heard his voice, as distinctly as if he had whispered into my ear.

"I followed that voice, because I could do naught else. Once more I raced across the fields. Once more, sheep, and a shepherd or two, scattered from my path, but I raced on by, touching them not.

"Once more I came nigh unto Camelot, but in the brilliant moonlight this time.

"I met Merlin on the ridge of a hill, where he stood as a black shadow, as if no light could touch him. I saw only his pale face, floating in darkness, brighter than even the Moon. He reached down and touched me on the shoulder.

"Thus I was changed back into a man. It was like a tumbling fall. I lay huddled at the enchanter's feet.

"'Get up,' he said.

"So I got up, and stood beside him. Indeed, I towered over him, though he was a tall man, and the peaked hood of his cloak and the staff in his hand made him look taller still.

"From the hilltop we two looked down on the valley of Camelot, where the town and the castle were all ablaze with lights.

“‘Arthur makes merry tonight,’ Merlin said, ‘for the last of the rebel kings has yielded to him, and he is truly now master of all Britain. His queen and his loyal companions are seated around him, and all is right with the world.’

“I let out a beast’s howl through my human throat, and it broke into a sob. I tried to understand how I could ever have imagined that I could go, as an impostor, into such company. A part of me was filled with rage at such merrymaking, and yearned to burst into Camelot and tear the King and his knights and his queen limb from limb.

“‘Don’t be jealous. Let them have this moment,’ Merlin said. He looked down on Camelot with some unvoiced longing of his own. I could tell that much. ‘It won’t last,’ he said after a while.

“I looked upon Camelot also, and although I didn’t entirely understand what I was saying, as if the beast overheard the man speaking and the words were like barking. ‘I want to go there, still,’ I said.

“He looked at me, a little surprised. ‘Really?’

“‘Yes.’

“And we walked down the hillside beneath the full Moon, in the brilliant moonlight which was like a silvered river, and our shadows were cast long and dark before us; while the castle of Camelot seemed to reach to the heavens, ablaze with lights; and Merlin began to question me, about what I had learned in the forest in my time as a beast. I couldn’t tell him much. I had learned very little. What the beast knew, the man could not put into words. The beast lusted for blood, but innocently, for that was its nature. The man carried his rage like a hot stone in his heart. I wanted to kill Giles. The beast had never been able to comprehend many human things—yet I wondered if what had happened to me was Giles’s idea of a *joke*, whether he might not somehow be sitting in a bright room with all those lords and ladies and *laughing* about it all.

“The beast growled, though the man’s throat.

“Merlin spoke. ‘You are a project of mine,’ he said. ‘There is a purpose. Don’t jump to hasty conclusions.’

“Neither the man nor the beast in me knew what he meant.

“He smiled. ‘An old enchanter has to keep busy, weaving webs of fate, that sort of thing. The King doesn’t need me. He’s on his own now. But I suppose I have to keep on meddling. It is my nature. There *is* a shape and purpose to all that has happened to you, though it may not be clear to anyone yet. Not even to me.’

“Now we stood before the gates of Camelot, and I was again afraid, the beast afraid of the many men, their foul smells, their sharp spears and swords, and their fire most of all. But the man realized that he was almost naked, and hairy, and covered with dirt, and he was ashamed to go in, and afraid, lest be taken for a lunatic or a giant or an ogre of the sort any knight looking for a quick and easy quest could make short work of.

“Then I perceived with great wonder, that the Moon was down, and it was *not the same night as before*, that indeed, as the beast could somehow tell, whole seasons had passed between the time we had left the hilltop and the time we had arrived before the gate. The stars had moved. Perhaps years had gone by.

“And I had become a beast again, whether by Merlin’s hand, or by some obscure turning of nature, as if the animal, dreaming it was human, had awakened from that dream. I padded softly beside Merlin, my shoulder waist-high to him.

“Because he was a famous enchanter, people may have looked away when they saw the two of us pass, or shut their windows, or crossed themselves, but no one challenged us. We came into Camelot. Through a beast’s eyes I saw the inside of the castle for the first time, the great pillars, the tapestries, the immense feasting hall where the King and his knights sat at the Round Table; but this was not a time of merrymaking, and the place was almost dark, only a few torches and lamps guttering low;

and in the midst of the room there floated a miraculous white light, and there was a power in the air which the beast feared, something more terrible than fire, something which drove me back, a barrier which held Merlin back too, so we two could only stand in the doorway and witness while some of the men pounded on the table in frustration and some wept, and some fell to their knees, and one or two leapt to their feet, waving swords, swearing solemn and thunderous oaths, and generally making fools of themselves. Yet no one laughed at them, for, as I only came to understand later, we had come upon that most solemn moment in the history of Camelot, that terrible Pentecost when the Holy Grail appeared before all the knights and God himself sent them forth on their impossible quest.

“Merlin was held back because, though he served the cause of good, he was still half-devil. His father had been a demon. This power was from God, not the sort of thing Merlin dealt in. He had no place here, now. He was no longer needed, though he still liked to meddle.

“It was only much later, when the light had faded and all the knights had gone, that Arthur sat alone at the Round Table weeping, for he knew that they were sinful men and that most would perish in the quest, and he would never see them assembled together again; it was only then that Merlin and I came before Arthur.

“‘My Lord?’

“The King looked up. He scarcely gave me a glance. I crouched down, submissive, as a hound before its master.

“‘Oh, it’s you.’

“‘My Lord, here is one who would serve you.’

“He looked at me, then. I saw the sadness in his eyes.

“‘I remember you,’ he said.

“‘I would serve you,’ I said, with a human voice, for I had become again a man, and not, I think, by any trick of Merlin’s. Merlin’s power seemed, at that moment, to be very weak.

"I knelt before my king, as awestricken by Camelot and by being in the presence of King Arthur as any ploughboy. I knew the stories. I had grown up in the shadow of Arthur's greatness, as had we all in those days, for all that greatness never seemed to have noticed or touched me before. I was like a moth, rising toward the impossible fire of a distant star.

"Wearily, the King held out his hand to me, and for a moment I almost forgot myself and would have licked it, but then I took his hand in mine and held it and swore to serve him. I didn't know if that was the right way to do such a thing or not.

"I am comforted,' said he, 'now that the others are all gone, to have at least one knight who will serve me still.'

"It was impossible to read Arthur's thoughts then. Was he, just a little bit, angry at God for what God had done, or just sad and resigned? I couldn't say. But I felt that in some small way I was still in the presence of God, or at least within the fading aura of the passage of God and the Grail through the hall, so it was time for utter truthfulness.

"I'm not a knight,' I said, 'nor was I ever. I am an impostor.'

"Without a word, he drew his sword Excalibur, which he wore by his side, and he tapped me on either shoulder as I crouched down before him. 'Now you're as much a knight as anyone. You're not leaving on any quest soon, are you?'

"No, My Lord.'

"Arise, then, Sir Wolf.'

"I started to rise, then paused, as if I knew what was coming next.

"The King turned to the wizard and said, 'Is this one of your projects, Merlin?'

"The wizard said nothing, but gently nodded.

"To me the King spoke, and his voice was wistful, and he leaned forward as if confiding a secret. 'Merlin used to do that sort of thing all the time when I was a boy. He turned me into a fish once. He said it was for my education.'

"I fell down, away from King Arthur. My limbs melted and changed and I became a wolf once more. And *that* was how I served him, not as a man, but as a beast. Gradually, the surviving knights trickled in from their quests. Some were wounded. Some had merely given up early. Some did not return at all, and we heard that they had died. Then the report came back, rather confused, that Galahad *had* found the Grail, and, achieving perfection, no longer had any place on Earth, and so was assumed into Heaven. Not even Lancelot could look upon him at the very end. It was a profound mystery, which weighed on the hearts of every man.

"But a semblance of life returned. There were occasional quests, the even more occasional battle, many tourneys, and numerous hunts at which I ran beside the King and beside Lancelot as they galloped over the countryside after the quarry. This was my *role*. In a court so used to miracles, no one saw it as out of place that King Arthur had a strange, enormous, and wild-looking dog, which sat under his table at feast times and took scraps from his hand. It was just as well. Sobered though everyone was by the Grail quest, the knights would never have accepted into their fellowship a half-naked wild man whose only tourney appearance had ended in little over a minute. I am sure they would have laughed and made cruel sport, for they were indeed sinful men, and their wicked ways gradually came back to them, as if, with the Grail's holiness fading, they awakened from the dream of goodness.

"Yet in those last years of the glory of Camelot, I knew such happiness as I might achieve, the only contentment I have *ever* known, for here, in this role, I actually *had* a place, and no one questioned my right to it.

"Then it ended. I served the King, yes, as his hound, as his messenger, but more, for only he knew the secret, that I was also a man, and had some vestige of a man's reason even as a beast.

"I became, also, his spy.

"That was how it all ended. It ended because I happened to be resting on the floor outside the door when the King was

away and Lancelot was in bed with Guenevere. Suddenly Lancelot, certain he had heard a noise, got up and pushed the bedchamber's door open, and the door jammed into my ribs and I let out a yelp.

"It's Arthur's damned dog. I ought to kill it."

"Don't," said the Queen. "I think it comforts him. He's going to need comfort."

"Nevertheless, Lancelot reached for his sword.

"But by then I was racing down the stairs and away, to report everything to King Arthur. Yes, it was me. Agravaine, Mordred, and others voiced suspicions, but I was the one who actually told Arthur of the treachery of his best friend and the unfaithfulness of his wife. Yes, I am the one who brought Camelot crashing to the ground."

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Lupus Nemo was weeping, then, very human tears.

"I curse God for his cruelty," he said. "I curse him! I'm sorry, Father, but I do!"

"No," I said. "You must not, if only to save your own soul."

He spat angrily into the fire. "I'd tear out my soul and throw it away if I could. Beasts do not have souls, and are happier for it."

Very seriously I said to him, "Do not blaspheme. Both of us could be dead very soon. We are facing eternity."

Fearfully I listened to the sounds of the forest. Were those ice and twigs falling, or the footsteps of Saxons?

"Do you have any idea what happened next, Father? *Do you?*"

"I think I know some of it."

Lupus Nemo resumed his tale.

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"Yes, you know how Arthur himself became, perhaps, a little mad. Maybe he sought new glory because he was jealous of Galahad. After all, he, Arthur, had never found the Holy Grail. *He* had proven far from perfect, and was a sinful man like all

the rest. For some reason, then, out of pride, he declared war on Emperor Lucius of Rome and went charging off into Gaul, taking towns, burning fields, bringing death and misery to countless thousands. That was where I found him, where I transformed once more into a man when we were alone in his tent, and told him the news.

"It's all a muddle. I can't keep the tale clear in my mind. Lancelot went mad for a while too, and raved like a beast, but it didn't do him any good. Arthur had to call off his war against Lucius to deal with Lancelot. Then he had to call off *that* to deal with Mordred. The knights slew one another. They fell like leaves. No one knew where anyone's loyalty was anymore. We were whirled about, like leaves, too, in a great wind.

"I sought out Merlin. I hadn't seen him in years. He had faded away after the Grail quest. Arthur longed for him, but he did not come. I searched for him. He must have been in the crystal cave by then, already enfeebled, ensnared. He appeared to me once in a dream, while I, as a beast, slept in a field, in my quest for him. He walked back and forth in my dream, but he said nothing. He looked sad. I think he regarded me as his unfinished business, one of his meddling projects that he never managed to bring to fruition. But *Arthur* was his unfinished business, and the whole of Camelot was the project neither one of them had managed to bring into fruition, and now it was crashing down all around us.

"I turned back, to find Arthur, who was, after all, my lord, whom I must serve until the death. By the time I caught up with him, he was at Camlann, facing off against Mordred. Everyone knows how there was almost a parley that day, between the King and his traitorous son, but Satan sent his serpent to bite one of the knights on the foot. The knight drew his sword to strike, and in an instant the battle exploded on every side.

"As a huge wolf, I fought my way across the battlefield. With teeth and claws I tore men apart. I wallowed in blood. The sky turned dark, with the swarming of ravens, with the clouds of an

oncoming storm. I thought the world was ending. It was. The world I knew, where I had some sort of place, even if only at Arthur's feet under the table, was indeed coming to an end.

"I found Arthur, battered, covered with blood, standing amid a mountain of the slain. He leaned on his spear, breathing hard, waiting, while, walking toward him from out of a little hollow of ground was Mordred, whom I knew at once, by his golden armor, by the strange visor he wore, which looked like a mask of the sun, and by his horrible laugh.

"Laughing, Mordred approached Arthur.

"Laughing, too, Mordred's squire came with him, and I saw to my astonishment and rage that the squire was someone I hadn't thought about in years, someone whose name I had all but forgotten, none other than Guileful Giles.

"And in my rage, though in beast form, I stood up on my hind legs and walked like a man, and I leapt upon the wide-eyed, now-terrified Giles, who screamed, 'You!' and then, 'Wait! Wait! Aren't we still friends?' as he tried to defend himself and I tore away bits of his shield with my teeth and pressed him to the ground.

"No,' I said, with a man's voice through a wolf's throat, 'we are *not* friends!' I spat out wood, leather, and bits of metal into his face. The beast that I was merely wanted to rip out that throat and tear out those wide eyes, but the man said, 'I want to know *why*'?

"He squealed and tried to wriggle away. 'I don't know! It looked like a good idea at the time! I wanted to make us famous! Maybe I'm really stupid. Is that it? I'm stupid and I didn't know how things were going to turn out—'

"A prophecy! A miraculous utterance! *He didn't know how things would turn out.* Ha! Verily! Indeed! Who could ask for more than that?

"He didn't know. Nor did I, even when I heard My Lord King Arthur's voice thunder, '*Traitor, thy death-day has come!*' and Mordred screamed, and I looked up to see that Arthur had run

Mordred full through the body with his spear, but that Mordred forced his way along the shaft and struck Arthur a great two-handed blow on the side of the head with his sword.

“Both of them fell.

“I let Giles wriggle away. Nothing mattered. Not anymore. Certainly he didn’t.

“I crawled over to the King where he lay. One of his eyes was open, the other shut. I nuzzled my head against his hand, and his fingers stroked me a little, and he sighed, ‘It is you at the last.’ He said nothing more for a time. The battle drifted away from us. Arthur kept on stroking my head. Later, Sir Bedivere came by and Arthur commanded him to take Excalibur and throw it into the lake. Bedivere, like Peter, was tempted three times, and denied his sin, but in the end he did what he was told. That’s all true. I was there to witness it.

“Then Bedivere and Arthur both wept, while the King still stroked my head with his fingers, and my sorrow was as great as any of theirs, though I am sure that my role in all this will never be recorded in any of the chronicles, for all that my tale is surely as strange and as wondrous as any of the others.

“We waited until the three queens came, to carry Arthur off to Avalon.”

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“Maybe that was your purpose,” I said, “given to you by Merlin, or even by God, that you should comfort Arthur a little at the end. That you should be there for him to stroke your head with his hand. Nothing more than that. Many others did far less for him.”

Lupus Nemo made no reply.

In the darkness, ice rattled as the wind stirred the branches. A long silence followed. The fire was dying.

“I have come to a conclusion,” he said at last. “I don’t hate God after all.”

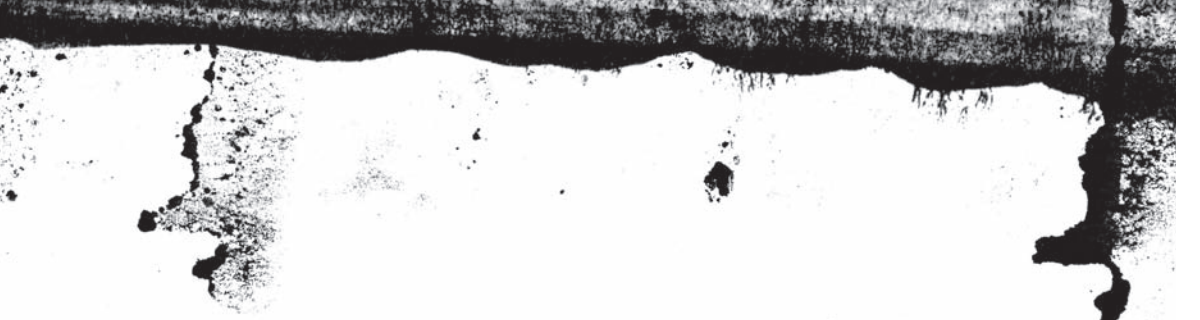
“That is good.”

“My rage is spent. The man that I was needed to tell this story, for the first and last time, perhaps to be remembered, perhaps in fulfillment of some obscure plan. That much has become clear to me from the very act of telling it. But the beast doesn’t care. The beast just wants to end the story. Let me then cleanse my soul of all my sins, and hand it over to God, who is welcome to it, because I won’t need a soul anymore, if I become a beast again and remain a beast. If I don’t have a soul, the other wolves won’t smell humanity on me and they will accept me as one of their kind. Therefore I forgive Giles. I can even forgive Mordred. For beasts do not hate as men do. They are not treacherous. They are innocent and without sin, even the bloodiest of them.”

For all my own life and soul, I wanted to plunge into a theological argument now, more than ever before, to make him know his errors, to drive away his despair; but he had asked for his soul to be cleansed, so I could only do that and hope for the best. Not as a tale to be told, but as a recounting of his sins, he made his confession, and I absolved him, and he said, in the end, only “Thank you.”

Then there was a growling in his throat, and, on all fours, he shook off the cloak wrapped over him, and he stood there, facing me, his tongue hanging out, and his eyes aglow, with no trace of humanity left that I could see.

He stared at me only for an instant, then turned and ran off into the forest.



THE BROWN BOMBER AND THE NAZI WEREWOLVES OF THE S.S.

Matt Venne

Matt Venne is the writer of the upcoming TV miniseries *Stephen King's Bag of Bones*. He's also scripted teleplays for the *Masters of Horror* episode "Pelts" (directed by Dario Argento) and the *Fear Itself* episode "Spooked" (directed by Brad Anderson), as well as the screenplays for *White Noise: The Light* and *Mirrors II*. His first book, *Cruel Summer*, was recently released by Tasmanian Publications, and his short stories have been featured in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* and the anthology *Blood Lite*. Venne's original comic book series *Beyond the Wall* is being published by IDW. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife, Brynna, and their children.

When he started work on "The Brown Bomber," Venne had a very specific story model in mind: "I wanted to write something in the vein of Robert E. Howard's lesser-known but fantastic boxing tales, specifically those of his semi-pro pugilist hero, Sailor Steve Costigan, who, typical of Howard (and the best of pulp fiction as a whole), was a larger-than-life character fighting in exotic ports of call, taking on any number of hardscrabble foes during page-turning adventures of high imagination . . . Somehow along the way—don't ask, 'cause I have no idea—that kernel of an idea morphed into a story about Joe Louis and World War II and Nazi werewolves."



CHAPTER 1

Everybody's Got a Plan Until They Get Hit

AN ILLEGAL KIDNEY PUNCH, thought Himmler as he walked down the rain-soaked path toward the base of the north tower. The Negro Joe Louis, the Brown Bomber, had knocked out Max Schmeling, but he had done it with an illegal punch, and the world turned a blind eye to it, essentially negating all that his beloved Nazi Germany stood for.

Himmler stopped for a moment to calm his nerves, looked up into the stormy night sky, wiped the raindrops from his spectacles . . . was finally soothed by the magnificent sight of his center of occult operations, Castle Wewelsburg: it looked positively regal lording over the surrounding woods—and the lightning strike that crashed the very moment Himmler was admiring its powerful stony façade reminded him that he would be triumphant.

He had God on his side.

And the Master Race.

And werewolves.

Himmler took a deep breath, then threw open the metal door to the crypt of the castle's north tower, descended the moldy steps to the iron bars below, then reached into his pocket for the keys to open them. After a few attempts Himmler finally found the right key—*have to mark it with a little swastika or something*, he thought to himself—then stepped into the circular room.

The deep pit in the center of the crypt reeked of human suffering, and Himmler noticed that the swastika engraved in the ochre stone ceiling overhead was splattered with dried blood and flecks of long-rotten carnage.

He crossed to the edge of the pit and looked down into its darkness.

He smiled at the man chained below.

The Brown Bomber did not smile back.

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Joe Louis stared the ugly German down until he hauled his Nazi butt away—and it wasn't until he heard the iron bars close and lock behind Himmler that he let the strains of trouble return to his normally solemn visage. He rubbed his ankle where the iron manacle had dug a deep gash into his skin, and wondered again how he, Joe Louis, America's Hero, had ended up down here, wasting away in a dank pit at the bottom of a Nazi castle.

He didn't have to join the Army back in '42—and he had plenty of friends and family who told him as much every day before his departure. Most of the people he knew—most of *his* people—tried to talk him out of it. His trainer, Jack Blackburn, had taken him to task: "Why you gonna go and risk your life for a country that ain't done squat for you?" he'd asked. "Only thing America ever done is hold you down," he'd crowed. "Hell, Champ, they don't even let coloreds fight on the front lines, so why you gonna throw away your career when they don't even want you," he'd bickered. But Jack Blackburn had also suggested early on that the Brown Bomber only fight other African-Americans, and look how wrong he'd been about that.

Besides, Joe Louis didn't think the race issue was quite that simple.

Least he hoped not.

And, ironically, it was because of his great Nazi foe, Max Schmeling, the Black Uhlan of the Rhine.

How many men in America, black or white, had been invited to the White House by the president himself? Joe Louis would never forget having dinner with President Roosevelt, who'd squeezed his arm and told him that America needed muscles like his to beat Germany.

Joe Louis remembered Schmeling arriving in New York for their rematch, and the Nazi Party publicist telling the press that a black man could never defeat a member of the Aryan race, and that Schmeling's prize money would be used to build German tanks.

For one moment in time the entire country unanimously agreed on something: Joe Louis had to defeat Max Schmeling. A black man had to defeat a white man.

It seemed to Joe Louis that, when pushed into a corner, America could come to her senses. The fight quickly became more than just a boxing match; it was bigger than sport, was broadcast on radios all over the world, and seventy thousand people had packed into Yankee Stadium on the night of the fight to see if good or evil would prevail.

Two minutes and four seconds later they had their answer.

"Two minutes and four seconds of murder," one announcer called it.

The Brown Bomber destroyed Schmeling with a series of swift lefts and nasty rights, fists like hammers to the face and body, pummeling his opponent with a barrage of brutal blows, knocking Schmeling to the mat three times in the first round before his trainer threw in the towel, which was meaningless, because Schmeling stayed down long after the third ten count was over, the white towel hanging as limply on the ropes as the big dumb German.

Every tavern in the country was stuffed to the gills as America celebrated her defeat of Nazi Germany on that warm summer night in 1938. America was young and victorious and a light in the darkness of the encroaching world war.

And at the center of it all was her Hero, Joseph Louis Barrow. The Brown Bomber.

Ugly as Joe Louis knew America could be, he had also seen how she could rally around a just cause, and by the time the war rolled around four years later, he'd already made up his mind—it was like he'd told those reporters the day he left for

the war: "Lots of things wrong with America, but Hitler ain't going to fix them."

And his service to America should've been so easy, really. Nothing like the brutal training regimen he'd put himself through four years ago to fight Schmeling. All Private Joe Louis had to do was travel around Europe, visit with the troops, and put on a few boxing exhibitions—all while raising morale overseas and at home.

That was the plan anyway.

But who knew Himmler was such a boxing fanatic?

Himmler and his Occult Corps had learned the whereabouts of the Brown Bomber's latest exhibition and attacked the small base with a vengeance. The last thing Joe Louis remembered about the surprise attack was the Luftwaffe flying overhead and so many bombs and German paratroopers raining down that the blue sky went black.

Several days later he woke up in his dank little pit inside the Nazi castle, shackled to a chain in the center of the dungeon.

A wolf howled from somewhere deep inside the north tower.

Joe Louis bit his nails.

Whatever they had planned for the Brown Bomber, he knew it couldn't be good.

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Looking back, Max Schmeling was glad the *Hindenburg* blew up.

After the first time he fought Joe Louis, and beat him soundly, knocking him out in the twelfth round, he had been whisked back to Germany as a national hero aboard the famous zeppelin airship. He was bigger than God—bigger than *Hitler*—and he had been featured in so many newsreels and propaganda films that he finally lost count somewhere after two hundred appearances. He'd even managed his own triumph of the will by bedding both Leni Riefenstahl and Eva Braun—at the same time.

Maximillian Adolph Otto Siegfried Schmeling was the toast of Nazi Germany. He was winned and dined and treated like a true national treasure.

Life was *groß*.

Until he lost the rematch.

In the moments immediately following his embarrassing defeat at the Negro's hands, the German press tried to push the idea that the Brown Bomber had used an illegal kidney punch to defeat him—an idea that Himmler immediately latched onto—but even Schmeling knew it wasn't going to fly.

And so . . . gone was his regal *Hindenburg* lift home (and it seemed like poetic justice to Schmeling that there was no more *Hindenburg* left to add insult to injury). Gone were his adoring fans and female companions and fine wines and gourmet meals.

The Black Uhlan of the Rhine was lower than chopped sauerkraut.

He was shunned from German publicity and movie premieres. Portrayed as a disgrace to the Master Race.

Cast down to the lowest rungs of society, and thusly drafted into the war just like every other expendable young German plebian.

And for all he had done or attempted to do for his beloved country's pride in fighting the mighty Joe Louis two times, he was ordered to serve in the Luftwaffe as a Fallschirmjäger, the German Army's highly dangerous and often fatal paratrooper unit.

Four years and too many insults to count passed in the dredges of the German Army, until that fateful day when his unit got wind of the Brown Bomber's whereabouts.

Schmeling was the first to volunteer to make the jump into enemy territory.

He couldn't wait to see the look on Joe Louis's face when the Negro saw his old German foe swooping down from the heavens above like a Nazi God to capture and punish him.

Maybe the old adage was true—maybe the third time would be the charm.

Maybe they would have their third and final match out on the battlefield, man-to-man, bare knuckles to bare knuckles, like Jack Johnson and Big Jess Willard thirty years before—the white man pummeling the black man into submission in the twenty-sixth round.

And maybe—*just maybe*—in defeating the Brown Bomber in their third and final match, Max Schmeling could reclaim his once bright and shining glory in the eyes of his Nazi commanders.

Or maybe not.

Second Lieutenant Schmeling was indeed the first soldier to come across Private Louis's body—but he was disappointed to discover that the Brown Bomber had been knocked unconscious by the force of the falling bombs.

Schmeling tried to revive him with smelling salts, but it was no use, and for a flickering moment the German was afraid his American foe might be dead.

Schmeling was disturbed by the fleeting feelings of concern for America's Hero. Told himself he only wanted to see Louis alive in order to beat him to death. He shook Louis forcefully, slapped him several times across the face, Joe Louis finally shaking his head groggily as Max Schmeling let out a sigh of relief.

Moments later Schmeling was pushed aside by his commanders who ordered him to have the Brown Bomber's body transported to Castle Wewelsburg, home to Himmler and his ghastly experiments in the occult.

It seemed Himmler had created a new foe for Joe Louis to fight.

One who was certain to win in a battle to the death.

The ultimate evolution of man's most primal, godlike nature.

Wehrwolf.

Nazi wehrwolf.

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The skinny little Nazi helped himself to a third plate of bratwurst and washed it down with a quart of beer. Lieutenant Heinz

Gehner was going to need his energy tonight, and it didn't help his nerves any that Himmler had been flitting around him all day like a chubby little cherub.

There was a part of Gehner that wished he could start all over.

He'd do many things differently, certainly, but at the top of the list of colossally dumb mistakes he'd made, he figured that turning himself into a werewolf to get on Himmler's good side probably took the German chocolate cake.

It had been over a year since Himmler and his Occult Corps had captured the Nazi Party's first pack of werewolves in the Black Forest, but all attempts to breed the creatures with other wolves to create an army of Nazi werewolves had proven futile, and—for reasons beyond Himmler's and his occult scientists' comprehension—even fatal: after months of trying to breed the vicious creatures, their supply had dwindled down to one.

Which is why Himmler asked for volunteers.

Human volunteers.

It had been five full moons since Gehner had willingly let the werewolf bite him, and on every single one of those full moons Gehner found himself in a world of hurt, bones stretched to the breaking point, teeth elongated into fangs, skin splintered with rough tufts of hair, nose blasted outward into a homely wolf's snout before he would black out into some bestial stupor of rage.

And the mornings after—*mein Gott!*

Three months ago he'd awoken with something worse than the worst hangover he'd ever had in his life, and was horrified when he staggered to the bathroom, nauseous, only to hurl up a half-digested human ankle bone.

This werewolf stuff was bull-*scheiße*.

But several days ago Himmler had promised him: perform your next task successfully and we'll find a way to cure you of your lycanthropy.

Damn well better, thought Gehner. *I've got a wife and family to feed after this war's over, and times are hard out there—especially for a werewolf, Nazi or not.*

He helped himself to another bratwurst.
 Goddamn, he was hungry.

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CHAPTER 2

Once That Bell Rings, You're on Your Own

Himmler looked around the crypt, pleased with the turnout. True, it was a far cry from the seventy thousand that had packed into Yankee Stadium that fateful night four years ago, but, all things considered, this was a pretty good crowd. It didn't hurt, of course, that he'd ordered every available Nazi within the region to be present for the festivities under punishment of death; but what was a little corporal punishment to Heinrich Luitpold Himmler?

Earlier in the week he'd had several of his henchmen build makeshift bleachers out of trees from the surrounding woods (he was glad he remembered to bring a pillow, because the pinewood was murder on his hemorrhoids), and the red banners with the Nazi insignia had been freshly pressed and draped down beautifully from the stone ceiling.

The boxing ring was another matter.

It was horrible looking.

Terrible and atrocious.

Just as Himmler liked it.

The ring's ropes were made of barbed wire, its corner posts constructed of rough wooden tree stumps carved into fierce black German eagles, and an enormous black swastika was emblazoned on the center of the blood-red canvas mat.

It was a thing of sporting death.

Himmler smiled.

It reminded him of the sickly sweet smell of gas.

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The Brown Bomber could hear a ferocious commotion in the crypt above the pit—the rowdy stomping of boots on wooden bleachers

accompanied by boisterous German singing—which only added to his surprise when a huge Nazi with a shaved head and thick mustache leaned over the edge of the pit and threw down a key.

The Champ tentatively unlocked the iron manacle around his ankle, then looked back up at the Nazi, who nodded then threw down a pair of threadbare shorts, timeworn boxing gloves, and a tattered bathrobe with the words *Der Braune Bomber* hastily stitched to its back.

He got dressed as the Nazi threw down a rope: “*Es ist Kampf-Nacht!*”

Joe Louis frowned. He’d grown to hate the sound of German while wasting away in the bottom of this pit: “English, damn you!”

The Nazi smiled as he pulled the Brown Bomber up from the pit with the rope.

“*Es Fight Night!*”

The Brown Bomber smiled. That was music to his ears.

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Max Schmeling snuck quietly into the packed hall and took a seat in the back of the bleachers. The energy in the room brought back the flood of adrenaline he used to love so much when he was the Fatherland’s golden boy.

He glanced around the crowded hall, caught a glimpse of Himmler in the front row, both men making momentary eye contact.

Schmeling smiled and waved meekly at his superior.

Himmler looked away, eyes filled with disgust.

Schmeling sighed, all the years of frustration coming back to haunt him.

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The skinny German’s black satin trunks were three sizes too big, as were his swastika-adorned gloves and robe. Gehner felt nervous standing outside the closed metal door that led to the

crypt at the base of the north tower, especially when a small marching band began to play the first strains of the German national anthem inside, accompanied by a chorus of Nazis over two-hundred strong.

Gehner nodded to himself, tried to sing along, thought about his wife and children back home in their tiny apartment in Berlin, and hoped this was worth it. He looked up at the night sky just as the clouds began to part, revealing the cantankerous glare of the full moon: as a small troop of soldiers threw open the door and led him into the auditorium-like crypt to thunderous German applause, Gehner yelped in pain.

The transformation was beginning.

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Joe Louis stood flabbergasted in the center of the barbed wire boxing ring, the mat littered with the trash the Nazis had pelted him with during his entrance. He watched in disbelief as his opponent was led stumbling toward the ring, the soldiers accompanying the scrawny German soldier forced to hold him up along the way, his body clearly being wracked by savage flashes of pain.

The Brown Bomber had never met a Nazi he didn't want to whup, but this was the first one to give him pause. *What, exactly, were they doing?* he wondered as the soldiers shoved the kid's shaking body through the barbed wire ropes then scurried back to the safety of the bleachers. Why were they forcing him to fight, when he clearly had no chance to win and didn't want to be there?

The German kid looked up at the Brown Bomber.

Held his gaze. The fearful look in his eyes now replaced with . . . savagery.

Joe Louis flinched when the kid let out with a curdling howl.

The crowd of Nazis fell silent.

Himmler wiped the steam of excitement from his glasses.

Schmeling watched in captivated revulsion.

Gehner dropped to his knees, snarling in pain as the transformation began: his limbs elongated to twice their size, and the muscles all over his body bulged into a strong but sinewy shape. The bones in his face cracked as they were thrust forward of their own accord, his mouth and nose merging into one large snout of bone and cartilage, his teeth pulled painfully into dull fangs, his stretched and ripping skin quickly congealing with a grotesque smattering of wet hair, as black and coarse as the beast's furiously pounding Nazi heart. His feet extended into agile paws with opposable digits, his eyes into yellow deadly slits, his tongue into a thick black corpuscle-riddled thing, his lower vertebrae into a disgusting tail as heavy as a bullwhip.

Gehner's black satin boxing shorts now fit him perfectly, as did his enormous swastika-adorned robe and gloves.

The crowd of Nazis finally reclaimed their boisterous energy when the werewolf leapt to its strong hind legs, ripped its robe into tatters revealing a hulking chest matted with a down layer of fur, then raised its right boxing glove high into the air, its forearm pointing ramrod straight to the swastika engraved in the ochre stone overhead, and howled the only words a dumb animal could possibly howl:

"Heeeeeeeeeiiiiiiilllllll!"

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Joe Louis was stupefied.

This was a far cry from his Bum of the Month Club, and while he'd also seen a lot of scary fighters up to that point in his career—Primo Carnera; Buddy Baer, who'd even knocked him through the ropes in the first round of their fight; James "Cinderella Man" Braddock; and Billy Conn, to name a few—the Brown Bomber had never seen anything like this.

He stood frozen in his corner, staring in horror at the snarling beast in the black satin Nazi trunks and boxing gloves that stood across the ring from him.

It wasn't until the bell rang that Joe Louis was snapped from his stupor.

The crowd roared as the Nazi Werewolf darted across the ring toward its opponent, saliva dripping from its snapping jaws as it leapt into the air to pounce on its prey—but that's when the Brown Bomber's instincts kicked in. He crouched low, blocking the beast's attack, a strong left forearm followed by a wrecking ball right hook to its ribcage!

The Nazi Werewolf yelped in pain as several broken ribs ripped through its hairy torso!

Joe Louis used the momentary lull in the attack to strike again: he pummeled the beast with a barrage of left-right combinations to its body and skull, its left yellow eye sealing shut, its snout dribbling blood like a leaky faucet. Himmler himself was splattered with the werewolf's blood!

And that's when the Brown Bomber really got down to business. He blasted the beast with a series of deadly blows. The auditorium was stunned into silence. The Brown Bomber was on the verge of embarrassing Nazi Germany once again. But the Nazi Werewolf turned its jaws directly toward the Brown Bomber's right hand as he was about to deliver the killing blow, and clamped its jaws down on Joe Louis's fist. For a moment the Champ was afraid that he, too, might be turned into one of the godforsaken creatures, until he realized that his boxing glove was protecting him.

The Nazi Werewolf had locked its strong jaws down on the Brown Bomber's right glove like a German shepherd wrestling with a chew toy. The beast shook its strong head and neck back and forth, nearly ripping the Brown Bomber's arm from its socket, its jaws locked tight as Hitler's sphincter on Joe Louis's boxing glove-protected hand, easily overpowering him.

Max Schmeling leaned forward in his seat for the first time that night, realizing that the Brown Bomber might actually lose this fight.

Himmler smiled and rose to his feet, cheering wildly in his high-pitched little voice, his fat cheeks flush, his beady eyes watery with emotion.

The Brown Bomber tried to wrangle free, but quickly realized it was futile. Jaws still clamped down on its opponent's right glove, the werewolf then used its leverage to knock the Champ down, a wolfen version of a judo take-down, the Champ's arm still locked in a furry armbar, then straddled him with the rest of its massive body, pressing down on the Champ's ribs, pushing the life out of him, and opening its jaws so wide that its mandible actually cracked slightly, a globule of blood-soaked drool cascading down as the beast leaned in to kill Joseph Louis Barrow.

His final infinitesimal moments slowed down into a flash of eternity, and the Brown Bomber had time to consider on his life.

He wondered if he had made the world a better place during his short time living in it. Was he really as important to his country's history as everyone made him out to be? At the risk of being vain during his last moments of life, he thought that he could answer yes to both of those things. Were it not for his victory over Schmeling four years earlier, his young country might not have been able to sustain its blissful lack of fear about the encroaching Nazi tide.

Were it not for the Brown Bomber, those little shreds of hope that got most Americans through the big swath of life might have been obliterated, imperceptibly turning the world into a place void of optimism, which—as Louis himself knew from stepping into the ring many a night—was the only thing that got you through to the final rounds.

Joe Louis felt at peace, confident that the math would add up in the end; confident that there would be a place for him behind the Pearly Gates.

He shut his eyes—didn't want the last thing he ever saw in this life to be some snarling Nazi werewolf ripping out his jugular vein beneath billowing banners of swastikas.

The Brown Bomber gave himself over to death, but it was only then that he realized everybody wants to go to Heaven, but nobody wants to die.

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CHAPTER 3

You Only Live Once, But If You Do It Right Once Is Enough

The cheering crowd fell silent with shock.

Joe Louis was surprised to find that he was still alive and lying unscathed on the mat of the boxing ring, and what he saw caused his eyes to pop with elation: Max Schmeling had leapt into the ring and pulled the snarling Nazi Werewolf away from Joe Louis's supine body just before the beast sank its teeth in for the kill. And the crowd was stunned when the Black Uhlan of the Rhine claimed one last victory in the ring by snapping the werewolf's neck with his supremely strong hands, and then whisking his former rival away before the crowd realized what was happening.

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The Black Uhlan of the Rhine dragged the Brown Bomber to the Fa 223 Drache on the airstrip outside Castle Wewelsburg, and the two men helped each other navigate the helicopter across the midnight skies as they escaped from the dark heart of Germany.

After Private Joe Louis debriefed his commanding officers on "The Nazi Werewolf Incident," all parties agreed that it would be in the country's best interest for the Brown Bomber to remain quiet about the matter. There was no need to strike more fear into hearts of Americans while we were at war, they reasoned. And although nobody could ever learn about the specifics of his adventure, Joe Louis was assured his grateful country would reward him until the end of his days.

He was, after all, America's Hero.

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Joseph Louis Barrow died forty years later, penniless and shattered by the IRS, which had reduced him to a shadow of himself amidst a constant barrage of inquests for taxes owed on his winnings.

All told, Joe Louis had donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to the war effort, but even more precious were the bodily sacrifices he made to uplift his country, taking numerous beatings in the ring so that Americans could feel the thrill of victory over the encroaching war between good and evil.

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After rescuing Joe Louis on that fateful night, Maximillian Adolph Otto Siegfried Schmeling returned to Germany, and went deep underground, forever turning his back on the Nazi Party, and risking his life to save numerous Jewish families from the clutches of a Germany gone mad.

Years later, upon learning that Joe Louis's family couldn't afford a funeral, Schmeling offered to pay for the entire ceremony, and even served as a pallbearer, the Black Uhlan of the Rhine helping the Brown Bomber into the ring for the final time.

Max Schmeling wiped a tear from his eye as they lowered the Brown Bomber's casket into its grave, nodded as he remembered the words he'd once heard about his great Nazi werewolf-fighting rival: "Joe Louis was a credit to his race—the *human* race."



POPULATION: 666

Nancy A. Collins

Nancy A. Collins is the author of more than a dozen novels, numerous short stories, and comic books, including *Swamp Thing*. She is a recipient of the Stoker Award, the British Fantasy Award, and the Deathrealm Award, as well as a nominee for the Eisner, John Campbell Memorial, World Fantasy, and International Horror Guild awards. Best known for her groundbreaking vampire character, Sonja Blue, and her visceral writing style, her works include the Vamps young-adult series and the collections *Knuckles and Tales* and *Sunglasses After Dark*. Her most recent project is the Golgotham series, the first book of which, *Right Hand Magic*, is scheduled for release by Penguin/Roc in 2010. Collins is also planning a new Sonja Blue novel, the first in nearly a decade.

“‘Population: 666’ was first published as ‘The Nonesuch Horror,’” the author explains, “a crossover between Sonja Blue and the lead werewolf character of my 1993 novel *Wild Blood*. But it’s been extensively reworked, introducing a completely different female vampire-slayer, in order to serve as the basis of a TV series. A pilot script has been written and attempts are currently being made to arrange financing to shoot a feature-length TV movie.” In its revised form, the story is presented for the first time here.



THE EVIL CAME WITH THE NIGHT, adding its shadow to those already cast by the half-moon that hung in the New Mexico sky.

Its arrival was not presaged by the howling of dogs or the shooting of stars, but by a hot, dry wind gusting in from the Continental Divide that made babies whimper in their cradles and the bones of old women creak like ship timbers.

One such old woman, sleeping nose to tail, awoke from a dream of rabbits and lost love and stared with amber eyes at the stars stretched above her head. She sniffed the night air and caught a scent she did not like. The old woman twitched her ears and clicked her teeth, as she was wont to do when uneasy.

There was trouble headed her way; trouble that walked like a man. It had been a very long time since she had last smelled such a thing, but not so long that she had forgotten the thing that carried such a scent.

The old woman got to her feet and trotted back in the direction of the shelter she called home. There would be no more dreams of better days and chasing rabbits that night.

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It wouldn't be fair to call Limbo a flyspeck on the map, but it wouldn't exactly be lying, either.

Even in its glory days, before the copper mine played out, Limbo was more a collection of houses clustered around a company store than a real town. When the Depression hit for real, Limbo took the blow like a hedgehog. By the time World War II rolled around, it was a legitimate ghost town.

For the better part of seventy years Limbo was forgotten, save for the occasional hermit and footloose hippie. Then, about

ten years ago, a group of strangers stumbled across the old ghost town, and Limbo was reborn.

The strangers who came to Limbo were strange indeed, but certainly no less peculiar than many who had come before. In the due course of time the new arrivals drew up a town charter, elected a town council, and appointed someone to keep the peace. That someone was Roy Skinner.

Since Sheriff Skinner more or less comprised the entire Limbo Police Department, he did not wear a proper uniform, like the lawmen down in Los Alamos and Santa Fe. Instead, he wore a pair of dungarees and a denim work shirt with a star cut from sheet metal pinned to his chest. His squad car was a late model Jeep Wrangler outfitted with an old CB radio that worked when it damn well felt like it, but Roy took his responsibility to the citizens under his protection very seriously. After all, everyone had the right to be safe from enemies and live free of fear, no matter what kind of skin they wore.

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The day began as they always did for Roy. He woke before the sunrise, careful not to wake his wife as he padded into the bathroom for a quick shower. By the time he was finished, Bonnie was awake. She was sitting naked on the corner of the bed, braiding the long, dark hair that hung to her waist.

"Sleep well?" she asked as he dried himself off.

"I had strange dreams," he said, yawning wide enough to display his back teeth. "It felt like I was being watched."

"You look tired," she said, caressing his thigh. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather come back to bed?"

"Believe me, honey, there's nothing that appeals to me more," Roy sighed, dropping down next to her. "But today's perimeter check."

Bonnie leaned forward and rested her chin on his shoulder. "Couldn't you put it off?"

"It takes me all day to check on the farthest points of my jurisdiction. Besides, what if Silas has fallen down his shithouse again? It would be another week before anyone would find him."

"You're always using Silas falling down the outhouse as an example for why you have to go to work!"

"Well, it was a pretty traumatic situation."

"For you or him?"

"Hey, *I'm* the one with the acute sense of smell!" he laughed.

By the time Roy finished dressing, Bonnie was at already frying up bacon and eggs on the wood stove. The twins sat at the kitchen table, forks at the ready.

"Morning, Daddy," they chimed in unison.

"Morning, Kasa; morning, Hoke," Roy said, kissing his daughter on the top of the head while tousling his son's hair. A heaping platter of bacon and scrambled eggs arrived at the table just as he sat down.

"Now, kids, let your daddy have some food," Bonnie chided. "He's got work to do today."

"What do you have to do today, Daddy?" Hoke asked as he munched on his bacon.

"Perimeter check."

"You think Silas fell down the shithouse again?" Kasa giggled.

"Kasa Skinner! Language, *please!*" Bonnie admonished, fixing her daughter with a disapproving glare.

"Sorry, Mama. I meant do you think Silas fell down the *crap*house again?"

"That's better," Bonnie said. "But not by much."

"So, what are you kids supposed to be learning today?"

"Miz Powaga is teaching us about the big bomb they built in Los Alamos."

Roy raised an eyebrow. "Is that a fact?"

"Some of the littler kids at school got scared when Miz Powaga started talking about wars and the bomb."

"What about you two?" Roy asked. "Are y'all scared?"

The twins exchanged glances, but it was Kasa who answered.

She had always been the dominant of the pair. "A little bit. But World War Two was a long time ago, right? They don't have bombs anymore, do they?"

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Roy pulled up in front of the Limbo General Store, which also doubled as the post office and town hall. The store's proprietor was seated on the wide wooden porch in a rocking chair, perusing the newspaper.

"Morning, Uncle Johnny," Roy called out.

"Mornin', Skin," Uncle Johnny replied, peering over the top of the paper. "What's new in the world?"

"You tell me," Roy chuckled. "You're the one with the newspaper."

"So I am," the older man said with a smile.

Uncle Johnny wasn't Roy Skinner's biological uncle, at least not as far as either man was aware. The title was more out of respect than kinship. Although the shopkeeper looked to be no more than fifty years old, and was in top physical condition, Roy knew Uncle Johnny was the oldest male in Limbo, and his wisdom was highly valued.

Although he was a shopkeeper now, Uncle Johnny had done damn near everything at one time or another, from merchant marine to cowboy to ramrod on a railroad gang. He had made and lost several fortunes in his lifetime, and knew how to deliver babies, set broken limbs, and nurse sick calves. And, to hear him tell it, he'd been killed more than once.

Uncle Johnny had not been amongst the original settlers, but had sought them out after hearing stories of the resurrected ghost town. As such, he was officially Limbo's first inductee. It was Uncle Johnny who refurbished and stocked the old general store, using his own personal fortune to provide Limbo with its necessities and the occasional luxury.

"What's the date on that paper?" Roy asked.

"Relatively fresh. It's just two days old. Sis brung it in when she fetched the mail." Uncle Johnny pursed his lips in disgust. "Seems Santa Fe got itself a boney-fide serial killer."

"That a fact? What they calling this one?"

"The Santa Fe Slasher." Uncle Johnny clucked his tongue and shook his head. "Sounds like a ball team, don't it? It's a shame what folks get up to, ain't it, Skin?"

"It sure is," Roy agreed. "You say Sis is back already?"

"Yep. She an' Tully left as the sun was comin' up. She's inside sortin' mail."

The interior of the store was dark, cool, and smelled of animal feed and aged wood. It was divided into two sections, one side of which was a long wooden counter fronted by a wrought-iron teller's cage, behind which stood a wooden cabinet full of different-sized pigeonholes.

Behind the cage stood a young woman, little more than a girl, really, dressed in a pair of faded jeans and a poet's blouse, her blonde hair hanging to the middle of her back in a tidy braid. She stood with her back to the door, popping the various letters into the appropriate cubbyholes.

"Morning, Sis."

Limbo's postmistress turned and smiled at Limbo's sheriff. "Morning, Skin. How are Bonnie and the twins?"

"Fine as ever." Roy glanced around. "Where's Tully?"

"He's out back splitting wood."

Sis and her younger brother Tully were more of Limbo's "inductees." Six years ago they wandered into town dressed only in rags and dirt, Sis all of eleven, Tully barely four. Orphaned and long used to relying on one another to survive, they were as close to feral children as any Skinner could remember seeing. It was Uncle Johnny who more-or-less adopted them, stating that he, too, had once been an orphan. In the intervening years, Sis had grown into a stunningly beautiful, and impressively strong-willed young woman, while Tully . . .

Well, Tully had grown.

Twice a week Sis drove Uncle Johnny's pick-up, with Tully riding in back, down to Los Alamos, where she picked up supplies for the store while dropping off and picking up the mail for the entire town at a private mail drop.

There were others in the Limbo community who ventured forth into the wide world, mostly for economic reasons. As head of the Coyotero Tribal Arts Collective, Bonnie made quarterly trips to a trendy gallery in Santa Fe, where she sold the traditional blankets, dance shawls, and pottery she and the others made to the owner, who resold them to even trendier tourists and wealthy collectors in New York and Los Angeles. The six-figure income the handicrafts generated were placed in the community treasure chest, which went to pay for those necessities—such as feed and fuel—that Limbo's citizens could not generate themselves.

The only regular visitor from the outside world was Billy Mustang, the owner of Kokopelli Fuel and Oil, who drove up once a month to refill the aboveground tank that served as the community gas station and swap out propane tanks in the various homes.

Most of the homes in Limbo had gardens, where corn, squash, and beans were grown, and most of the citizenry kept chickens. The only building with electric lights was the general store, which ran off a generator. The rest of the community warmed themselves with stoves fed by propane or wood, while solar panels heated water pulled by windmills from hand-dug wells.

The casual outside observer might assume from the proliferation of solar panels and high-tech windmills that Limbo was a commune full of back-to-nature, tree-hugging, vegetarian hippies. But to do so would be dangerous. For every household contained more than one born hunter, and there was always meat on the table at every meal.

Most of those who lived beyond the homes clustered about the general store and the schoolhouse were ranchers. Some

raised sheep and goats for wool and milk, while others bred cattle for meat and horses for transportation. However, there were a couple members of the Limbo community who were prospectors. Known as the Old Timers, they were the quasi-hermits who were already living in Limbo when it was a ghost town.

Most of the Old Timers lived in primitive shacks that were little more than lean-tos. It was Roy's duty, while on perimeter check, to stop by and briefly visit with each individual rancher and prospector, to make sure that they were okay and to find out if any of them had experienced anything out of the ordinary since his last visit.

Silas Samuels's shack had once been the foreman's office for the Limbo Mining Company. It stood four feet off the ground on sturdy pillar-like legs and had a front porch, stairs, and actual windows, although old burlap bags now covered most of the empty panes.

Silas's burro, Sookie, sat in the shade under the shack, watching the sheriff warily as she munched on her oats. A hundred yards behind the Old Timer's shack stood the gaping mouth of the old copper mine.

"Silas? You home?" Skinner called out as he climbed the stairs. He pushed on the door of the shack, which swung open, revealing a table, a chair, a pot-bellied stove, and a bed made of rags. There was no sign of Silas.

Skinner climbed back down the stairs, scratching the back of his head. He glanced around the tangle of disused mining equipment and ore carts that littered the compound. Wherever the prospector was, it couldn't be far away, since he had not taken Sookie with him. Roy took a deep breath and stepped in the direction of the outhouse.

"Silas! You in there?"

"Sheriff—! Over here!"

Roy heaved a sigh of relief and trotted over to the mine entrance as Silas emerged from the tunnel, a miner's helmet on his head.

Silas Samuels was tall and rangy, with shoulder-length gray hair and a grizzled beard. His face was as brown and seamed as a seasoned catcher's mitt from long years spent under the Southwestern sun. His teeth were yellow and stubby as kernels on an ear of corn, but nowhere near as tightly spaced. In his canvas jeans, denim work shirt, and square-toed brogans he looked like a cross between Gabby Hayes and Tommy Chong.

Roy didn't know how old Silas really was, but he assumed the Old Timer was between fifty and sixty-five. When questioned, Silas was, himself, somewhat vague on the subject, but from all accounts he had been squatting at the old mining facility since the Vietnam War. The old prospector made his living, such as it was, sifting through the abandoned mines that dotted the territory for various semi-precious metals and stones, such as copper and turquoise.

Where once he carried his finds to the nearest field office, now Silas sold the pieces of jasper and nephrite and chunks of copper ore he pulled out of the rugged terrain directly to the Coyotero, who used the stones to make necklaces and utilized the copper in the glazes on their pottery.

The Coyotero did not pay him in cash, but with vouchers redeemable at Uncle Johnny's store. But as Uncle Johnny was fond of saying: no one came to Limbo to strike it rich; they came to escape the lives they left behind. Silas was able to provide himself with all the foodstuffs and fuel he needed, as well as feed for his beloved Sookie. It wasn't the life of Riley, but it wasn't bad for a man who talked to his burro and had a horror of being around more than four people at a time.

"Sorry I dint hear you callin' th' first time, Sheriff. I was down checkin' on th' timbers, seein' they was shored up proper," the old prospector explained, switching off the small battery-powered lantern affixed to his helmet. "You got t'watch these ole mines, as they're as likely as not to cave in on you."

"So I've heard. You doing okay out here, Silas?"

"I ain't falled back down th' shit-chute, if that's what you're gettin' at," he chuckled. "I put in a new floor since then—replaced the one that got ate-up by the dry-rot. 'Tain't right when a man can't take a decent squat without tumblin' into his own mess. By the by, I ain't never thanked you proper for savin' me, Sheriff. I don't know what would have become of me if you hadn't come along when you did . . ."

"Don't mention it, Silas. Please. Don't."

Having satisfied himself that Silas was safe and sound, Skinner bid the Old Timer farewell, climbed back into his Jeep, and sped off in the direction of the next stop on the perimeter check, which just happened to be his mother-in-law's.

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"Why won't you let us move you into town?"

"Because towns are not the way of my people," Changing Woman replied simply. She stood in the shade of her one-room adobe, carefully watering her herb garden with a hollowed-out gourd. She was dressed in a skirt and blouse made on her own loom. Her dark hair, liberally shot with gray, hung in twin braids down her back. Although she was the oldest female in the community, she was in robust health and possessed a mind as sharp as a knife.

"Besides, I can take care of myself."

"I know you're perfectly capable of looking after yourself," Skinner sighed. "I'm just thinkin' about the kids. Wouldn't it be easier to train them if you lived closer?"

"The training they must undergo is not about ease or comfort," Changing Woman said sternly. "You lived too long amongst the humans. You have learned their soft ways."

"I didn't have any say in the matter, Changing Woman. You know that."

She paused, weighing Skinner's words. "You are correct. I cannot fault you there. You were born of one flesh, yet mothered by another."

Skinner frowned and quickly looked away. Even after more than a decade, it was still difficult for him to think of Edna Skinner, the woman who raised him from infancy and loved and protected him as fiercely as any child born of her womb, without a tear coming to his eye.

"Besides," Changing Woman said with a shrug, "it is in the nature of shamans to live apart. It is how we receive our visions." She turned to study her son-in-law. "How did you sleep last night?"

Skinner blinked. "Beg pardon?"

"Your sleep last night: was it troubled?"

"As a matter of fact it was."

"The wolf in your blood recognizes the presence of an enemy," she said, nodding approvingly.

"Enemy? What kind of enemy?"

"The oldest," she said, her eyes narrowing. "The one our kind has battled for millennia. I caught its scent last night. I have been working rituals ever since, trying to determine the exact nature of the beast. It is old, that much I am sure of—and hungry."

"Mother, I still don't understand . . . what are you talking about?"

"There is a vampire nosing about the perimeter."

Skinner's heart went cold as the word slipped from his mother-in-law's lips. "Are you certain?"

"As sure as death," she replied. "Call a council meeting for this afternoon."

"That settles it! You're coming back into town with me right now!"

"Don't be silly, boy!" Changing Woman said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "I have things to do before the meeting. Give my daughter my love."

"You can tell Bonnie that yourself; she'll be at the meeting, too."

"Ah! Perhaps I am getting long in the tooth after all, eh?" Changing Woman said with a sly smile, then dropped onto all

fours and loped off in the direction of the sweat lodge.

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The Limbo Town Council held its meetings in the back of the general store. Each of the various species that lived within the community elected members to represent their unique needs and concerns. Changing Woman and Bonnie represented the were-coyotes, Roy Skinner and Uncle Johnny represented the werewolves, while Sis and Powaq Ramirez, the town's school-teacher, represented the humans and witches, respectively. Tully, the council's unofficial sergeant-at-arms and sole ogre, sat on a chair near the door, alternately scratching himself and staring at his feet.

At ten years of age, Tully stood six-foot-six and weighed three hundred pounds, with a wide forehead that sloped backward, like that of a bull gorilla. A pair of tusk-buds jutted from his lower jaw. He had long, curved talons, like those of a wolverine, in place of toenails, which made wearing shoes difficult; he dressed in nothing but overalls.

Uncle Johnny opened the meeting by speaking aloud what the others were thinking. "Why was the council summoned, Sheriff?"

Skinner glanced at his mother-in-law. "I think its best you address that question to Changing Woman."

All eyes followed the shaman as she got to her feet. She was dressed in a cape stitched together from rabbit pelts, a fetish necklace of turquoise and jasper hanging about her neck.

"Last night I caught scent of a thing I hoped would never cross my path again. There is a vampire nearby."

Powaqa's eyes widened in alarm and the others began talking rapidly amongst themselves. Uncle Johnny got to his feet, waving his hands for silence.

"Quiet! Quiet, now! We can't let emotion get the better of us!" He turned to face the shaman. "Are you *sure* about that, Changing Woman?"

"There is no mistaking their scent."

"I'll grant you that," Uncle Johnny said with a nod. "They might be able to fool the eye, but the nose is another matter."

"What's it doing out here?" Bonnie asked.

"Maybe it's come to seek sanctuary," Sis suggested. "Maybe it wants to join us."

"Wants to *destroy* us is more likely!" Changing Woman spat in disgust.

"You don't know that!" Sis retorted.

Changing Woman's eyes narrowed. "Do not tell *me* what I do or do not know, little one!" she growled. "But I will tell *you* this: vampires are not like weres or ogres. While we may not be human, we are at least *alive*. We exist within the mortal cycle of birth and age and death. Our span of years is long, but it not without end.

"Vampires, however, are born of death. They are demons riding around in the flesh of dead men. Theirs is an approximation of life, not life itself. And their appetite is not merely for the blood of the living, but the negative energy that arises from misery and suffering. Of all the supernatural races, they are the most devious. For countless centuries they and werewolves have been blood enemies."

"But you are a were-coyote, not a werewolf," Sis pointed out. "What quarrel have you with them?"

"While I may find many things wrong with werewolf society, I cannot find fault with their hatred of vampires. And, unlike most of you, I have *seen* a vampire. I know what they are capable of. There is too much sun and open space for their liking in this part of the world. But that is changing with the growth of places like Phoenix, Santa Fe, and Albuquerque. Wherever there are human cities, you will always find three things: rats, pigeons, and vampires."

"Now, Changing Woman, I wouldn't say *all* vampires are bad news," Uncle Johnny said. "True, they *do* have a reputation for evil that's unique even amongst the shadow races. But they

ain't *all* bad. One of the best friends I ever had was a vampire! We rode together for a while, back in the old days. He was looking to start things anew in this country, just as we are. He met his final death tryin' to save my life. For all we know this vampire is like the one I was partners with. We shouldn't be quick to assume the worst. Besides, there is not one of us here—Miz Sis and Miz Powaga excepted—who ain't tasted human flesh."

"What about me, Uncle Johnny?" Tully asked, raising his hand as if he was in class. "I ain't et nobody yet!"

"I'm sorry, Tully," Uncle Johnny said, smiling indulgently at the young ogre. "I didn't mean to leave you out."

Tully smiled broadly, pleased with being acknowledged by one of the elders.

"You can put your hand down now, Tully," Powaga said gently.

"Yes, ma'am," Tully replied, lowering his arm.

"Uncle Johnny is right," Sis said. "Everything you said about vampires can also be said about ogres. But Tully isn't like that at all."

"Both Uncle Johnny and Sis have a point, Mother," Bonnie said evenly. "Maybe you're jumping the gun. We don't *know* what this vampire wants. Maybe it's just passing through. Maybe it's looking for a place to start over, just like everyone else here. It's not fair for us to judge beforehand."

"This is utter foolishness!" Changing Woman snapped, getting to her feet, her eyes flashing with anger. "Vampires are diametrically opposed to *everything* we're trying to do here! They have no interest in humans and supernatural living together in open accord! Werewolf society's attempts at infiltrating human political and religious organizations are child's play compared to what *they* have done over the millennia! They *thrive* on secrecy and manipulation! We *have* to bring the humans in from the perimeters and keep them under lock and key until we can hunt down and eradicate this danger!"

"You want to do *what*?" Powaga said in stunned disbelief. "You talk about us as if we were sheep!"

"And that's exactly how vampires see your kind," Changing Woman retorted. "You're no more than livestock in their eyes."

"It sounds like they're not the *only* ones who see us that way," the schoolteacher noted.

"Powaga's right," Skinner said. "The humans aren't going to take kindly to being rounded up, even if it is supposedly for their own good."

"Why just us?" asked Sis. "Why not bring in *everyone*, if this thing is so dangerous?"

"This is madness!" Changing Woman snarled. "We sit here chewing the fat when we should be out securing the town and trying to hunt down this monster!"

Bonnie turned to address the elder Coyotero. "Mother, you, more than anyone else, know that Limbo was created as a safe haven for supernaturals weary of the predator lifestyle. Is it so hard for you to imagine a vampire who has decided to exist in harmony with the living?"

"For all your experience, you are being naive in this matter, child," Changing Woman told her daughter. "Vampires exist to feed on the living and perpetuate their kind. Everything they do is designed to either put them in the proximity of their next meal or insure their continuance. Any other emotion or desire they might display is merely a pretense, designed to help them pass for human." The shaman got to her feet, glaring at the others seated about the table. "If you are not willing to bring the humans into town for protection, then at least warn them about what is out there."

"Do you think that's wise?" Uncle Johnny asked. "It could make people jumpier than they already are. The last thing we need is panicky ranchers blowing the heads off everything that moves."

"This is a question that can only be answered by the humans on the council," Bonnie said. "Sis? Powaga? What do you think should be done?"

The women exchanged uneasy glances.

“The idea of a vampire being on the loose is . . . disturbing,” the schoolteacher admitted. “But Uncle Johnny is right—we have to be careful with this information. I mean, we don’t *really* know if there really *is* a vampire, do we? I mean, no one has seen or heard it. And even if there *is* one out there, we don’t know what its intentions are.”

“Yes,” Sis said, nodding her head in agreement. “Until we know more about what this thing wants from us, we should keep quiet.”

Changing Woman shook her head, unable to believe what she was hearing. “It is *impossible* for vampires *not* to bring death and devastation wherever they go! They are harbingers of pain and suffering. Once this thing establishes a foothold, you will *see* how interested it is in observing Limbo’s ideals of inclusion and openness! The war between weres and vampires for control of the human race is about to be fought once again. Here. In Limbo. I will not lend my blessings to such madness.”

Changing Woman stalked to the door of the general store, turning to fix the council with one final, withering stare. “Fools! You are endangering not only yourselves, but your children as well! That is the problem with the young ones today: too much thinking, not enough instinct.”

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Silas Samuels’s idea of a good day, as opposed to a bad day, was extremely basic. A good day was when he found something that could be converted into supplies and feed for Sookie. A bad day was where he hurt himself, like when he fell through the floor of the outhouse. Using that as his yardstick, today had been a very good day, indeed.

He had been tempted to say something to Sheriff Skinner when he’d come by earlier, but managed to hold his tongue. He didn’t want to jinx his good luck by talking about it too early. Besides, he could very well be wrong. It wouldn’t be the first time that happened.

Silas couldn't really remember the time before he lived in Limbo. Some of that had to do with the relentless New Mexico sun parboiling his brain for a decade or two, but a good deal of it was because the life he had known before was a hollow one. Oh, it had been full of material possessions, deadline pressures, and expectations from everyone from his parents to his teachers to his bosses, but at its core he found it an empty, unfulfilling existence; which made it fairly easy to throw away that part of his life without looking back.

Living rough in the high country was hard, but it was a hell of a lot better than being a corporate wage-slave. In the brave, new world Silas had chosen for himself, success wasn't measured in promotions or salaries, but in keeping his belly full and his bedroll dry. When all was said and done, it really didn't bother him that he was surrounded by monsters.

Although Silas didn't have much use for people, he did like the newcomers who had moved into the old ghost town. Maybe that was because most of them weren't really people. The newcomers pretty much minded their own business and allowed him to do whatever he pleased. Every so often he would catch sight of them in their fur skins, running down rabbits or antelope, but he wasn't any more scared of them than any man should be of his neighbors. After all, they had an understanding: he wouldn't go shooting at them, and they wouldn't prey on Sookie.

One of the biggest benefits of the newcomers' arrival was that Silas no longer had to worry about mountain lions, despite all the sheep and cattle in the area. All the big cats cleared off the minute they caught wind of what had taken up residence in Limbo. Now he could leave Sookie stabled in the mine all night with a bale of hay and not have to worry about her being attacked.

Since he lived without electricity, the rising and the setting of the sun proscribed all of Silas's activities. As the light began to fade, he had a humble meal of black beans, flour tortillas, and

jerked beef, washed down with cold coffee. After making sure Sookie had plenty of feed and water for the evening, he retired to the cabin to enjoy a shot of whiskey and a pipe of tobacco before turning in for the night.

As he was finishing his pipe, a horrible sound shattered the quiet. He instantly recognized it as coming from Sookie, although he had never heard the burro in such distress before. He grabbed the Coleman lantern from the table and his double-barreled shotgun from behind the front door and hurried toward the mine.

"I'm comin', girl!" he shouted, holding the lantern aloft.

The burro was lying on her side just outside the mine. She had run as far as her tether would allow. She wasn't breathing and there was foam smeared about her muzzle.

"Sookie!"

Silas's knees gave out at the sight of his beloved burro stretched, cold and unmoving, on the hard ground. He dropped beside the felled beast, heart-stricken.

"What happened, girl?" he moaned as he stroked her stiff mane. As he touched the burro's throat, he felt something warm and wet. He pulled his hand away and stared at the blood smearing his fingers and palm. He lifted the lantern and saw twin puncture wounds.

There was the sound of a footstep on a loose rock inside the mine. Silas raised his shotgun in the direction of the noise.

"Who's goes? I *know* somebody's there!" he shouted. "You either answer me or I'll open fire!"

There was movement from deep within the shadows, and a pale figure emerged from the darkness. He was tall and thin, dressed in expensive, dark clothes smeared with blood and dirt. Silas noticed that the stranger's hands had very long, narrow fingers that ended in hooked nails. Although the stranger's face was as pale as milk, his mouth was red as crushed berries.

"Who are you, mister? Speak up, before I blow you full of holes!"

The stranger smiled as if something the prospector had said was amusing.

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“Where you headed, Skin?” Uncle Johnny asked as he gassed up the sheriff’s Wrangler.

“I’m going back out on perimeter check. Until we know what that vampire’s intentions are, I’ll rest easier knowing I’ve kept tabs on everybody.”

“Not a bad idea,” the older man said.

Roy retrieved an Army surplus issue walkie-talkie from the back of the Jeep and tossed it to Uncle Johnny. “I want you keep this on you for the time being. I gave one to Sis, too. In case something goes down out there, I want to be able to bring in back-up as fast as possible.”

“I read you loud and clear, my boy,” Uncle Johnny said with a crooked smile. “Just give a shout and I’ll come a’runnin’ like a dawg to the hunt.”

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Skinner scratched his head as he looked around the abandoned mining camp. Silas wasn’t in his cabin and Sookie was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they had gone into the hills to look for turquoise. Or, more likely, the prospector had taken the burro with him into the mine.

He walked over to the entrance, sniffing cautiously. He could smell the distinct reek of burro dung and piss, but there was another odor underneath it. While he could not identify the scent, there was no mistaking it belonged to a predator. Roy’s hackles came up instinctively.

“Skin! Skin, do you read me? Over!”

Skinner blinked, distracted by the squawk of the walkie-talkie. “I read you loud and clear, Uncle Johnny. What’s wrong? Over.”

“Neal McClain’s boy just rode into town, fit to bust. Says his

pappy needs you out at the farm. Says there's something hidin' in his barn. Over."

"I'm on my way! Johnny, I need you to get hold of Tully and bring him to the McClain place. Do you copy? Over."

"Roger, I copy."

"Good. I'll meet you at Neal's. Over and out." Skinner returned the walkie-talkie to its canvas sling. He eyed the yawning mouth of the mine for long moment, then turned and headed back to the Jeep.

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Neal McClain emerged from the wooden geodesic dome that served as his home as Skinner's jeep pulled up in the dooryard. He held a rifle close to his chest, like a soldier on parade.

"Thank God you're here, Sheriff!"

"What's this about there being an intruder on your property, Neal?"

"My boy Jimmy went out to milk the cow, as usual," McClain said, pointing at the barn that stood a hundred yards from the house. "He comes runnin' back, fit to be tied, sayin' he heard someone movin' 'round in the hayloft. So I went to check it out, and I'll be damned if the first thing I see when I climb up into the loft ain't a pair of, get this now, *white boots* sticking out from behind a bale of hay! That's when I sent Jimmy to fetch you, Sheriff."

"I see," Skinner said. He removed his gun from its holster, flipping the chamber open for a quick spot-check. "You been to the barn since then?"

"No, sir!"

"Good," he said, re-holstering his gun. "I'm gonna go have a look-see. I want you to wait here for Uncle Johnny and the others."

"Will do, Sheriff!" McClain called after him.

The barn was dark and smelled of fresh hay, old straw, and cow shit. Yet there was another, stranger scent mixed in with the manure and cattle-feed, one that was unfamiliar to him.

But whatever it was, it definitely smelled dangerous.

He paused as his head cleared the edge of the loft. There were several bales of hay stacked to on the right, from behind which poked a pair of white polythene boots, toes pointed toward the ceiling. Skinner quietly maneuvered himself so he could get a clearer view of what was wearing such unusual footwear.

Stretched out on a bed of clean hay was a young woman dressed in a long white leather duster, a pair of white designer jeans, a long-sleeved white silk shirt, and a pair of very dark sunglasses. Her hair was long and as white as the clothes she was wearing, her skin as pale as a shut-in's. Her hands were folded over her breast like that of the dead in repose. She did not seem to be breathing.

Skinner pushed back the brim of his cowboy hat as he stared at the lady in white before him. So *this* was the vampire Changing Woman was so worried about?

Although she did not look particularly dangerous, her scent told a different story. The odor that radiated from the unconscious woman rose like heat from a summer sidewalk. She reeked of blood, darkness, and violence, mixed with a tinge of madness. Skinner felt an instinctual ill ease in her presence and fought to keep a growl boiling in his gut from escaping his lips.

If what he had been told about vampire habits was accurate, the one in Neal McClain's barn would remain immobile until sunset. This meant he had a few hours to get her out of the hayloft and into the lock-up before she woke up. Then he could question the creature at his leisure—and destroy it, if need be. He just had to figure out how to get her out of the barn and into town without causing a panic. Transients wandering through the area were nothing new, so it would be relatively easy to pass the intruder off as a road tramp seeking a safe place to sleep. All he had to do was find a tarpaulin to wrap her in to keep sun off her when he hauled her to the pokey. Skinner grabbed the vampire by the ankles and began to drag her across the loft.

The kick to the sheriff's gut sent him flying across the loft and into the wall of the barn. He grimaced in pain and clutched his midriff. His spleen was ruptured, damn it! To hell with inclusion and living in harmony and all that other politically correct crap! The kid gloves were off! He didn't like shape shifting while in uniform, but sometimes it couldn't be helped.

He closed his eyes and allowed the change to wash over him. There was a wet popping sound, like someone pulling apart a stewed chicken, as his bones realigned and his musculature warped and twisted itself into a new geometry. His body hair thickened and grew coarse, spreading to cover his entire body. His ears became longer and moved higher up on his skull, while his fingernails thickened and curved in on themselves, becoming talons.

He growled and grabbed the encumbering remains of his shredded shirt, tearing it from his body as he got to his feet. He stood there on his crooked hind legs, his yellow eyes blazing with anger. In total, it had taken thirty-three seconds to change from sheriff to werewolf.

The vampire was on her feet, cautiously awaiting her opponent's first move. Skinner bared his teeth in ritual challenge and the vampire hissed in response, exposing a pair of ivory-white, razor-sharp fangs.

He came in low, clipping the vampire square in the chest with his left shoulder. The force of his lunge carried them through the unsecured hay doors. The next thing he knew, they plummeted to the hard-packed earth below. Although the vampire absorbed most of the impact, the rough landing barely fazed her. Skinner quickly scrambled beyond striking distance.

To his surprise, the vampire did not burn, bake, melt, crisp, or otherwise spontaneously combust in the noonday sun. He nervously pawed the ground with his hind legs as he watched her casually knock the dirt off her pristine white jacket. Despite her having fallen twenty feet, her sunglasses were still in place.

"Why aren't you on fire?" Skinner growled.

The vampire stopped dusting herself off and gave the werewolf a look of disgust. "Screw you, Rover."

"Now wait a minute, ma'am," Skinner said, holding up his forepaws, hairy palms outward. "I think there's been a misunderstanding." He tried his best to smile, but his snout made it look like a snarl. "This is all a *big* mistake."

"Yeah, and *you* made it, Rin Tin Tin," the vampire sneered.

The vampire launched herself at Skinner, fangs bared. Skinner pivoted sharply, coming in close to his attacker, and delivered a hard right punch to her kidney. The vampire groaned but remained on her feet. She staggered backward, spat a streamer of blood onto the barnyard dirt, and wiped the corner of her mouth on her sleeve. Upon seeing the bloodstain on the duster, she scowled.

"Now you've *really* made me mad!"

Before she could make a second lunge, a shotgun blast shattered the stifling afternoon heat like a thunderclap from on high. The combatants turned to stare at Uncle Johnny, who was pointing his pump-action shotgun at the vampire's head. Tully stood behind his adoptive father, looming over him like a statue carved from granite. Next to the ogre was Neal McClain, armed with a pitchfork.

"Freeze, lady!" Uncle Johnny barked. "This thing's loaded with silver buckshot!"

The stranger grinned broadly, exposing her fangs. "Go ahead and shoot—silver is no threat to me."

"Perhaps so. But I suspect gettin' your head blown into itty-bitty pieces ain't somethin' you can shrug off." He motioned with the barrel of the shotgun. "No funny stuff, or I'll part your hair startin' at your chin."

The vampire shook her head in amazement, a crooked smile on her face. "Werewolves, ogres, and humans—what is this place, a supernatural dude ranch?"

"What this *is*, ma'am," Skinner said, trying his best to keep the snarl out of his voice, "is a law-abidin' community of decent,

peaceable folk. And *you* are under arrest.”

“What for?”

“Trespassing, for one. Assaulting a peace officer, for another.”

“*Peace officer—?*” She stared at Skinner for a long moment, then began to chuckle. “Don’t tell me *you’re* the law around here!”

“Yes, ma’am, I’m afraid so. Now are you gonna come along easy-like, or do we have to get rough?”

“What the hell!” she said, throwing her hands up in mock surrender. “Whatever gets me out of this damned heat the fastest!”

.

Limbo’s jail was one of the few buildings left over from the boomtown days that had been made of stone instead of wood. Not only was it still in one piece, it also had the original iron bars on its solitary jail cell. The moment Skinner locked the door behind the vampire, she laid down on the bunk and returned to the death-like state he’d found her in.

Skinner mulled over what little he knew about his prisoner as he shifted out of his wolf-skin and back into his human persona. On one hand she *looked* like a vampire: she had the pale skin, fangs, strength, indifference to pain, and the instantaneous healing traditionally associated with the undead. But, on the other, she was capable of withstanding contact with direct sunlight and claimed to be immune to silver, which was lethal to werewolf and vampire alike.

As Skinner pinned his homemade sheriff’s badge onto the new shirt requisitioned from Uncle Johnny’s dry goods department, Changing Woman entered the cramped confines of his front office. She was dressed in her robes of office: an intact coyote pelt, its hollowed-out skull resting atop her head, the forepaws wrapped about her throat.

“You caught the undead thing.”

It was not a question. Skinner did not ask her how she knew. His mother-in-law had her own ways of finding out things.

“I’ve got her locked up.”

Changing Woman sniffed the air, a puzzled look on her face. “Her smell is strange. It is *like* that of a vampire, but it is not the scent of the creature I sensed the night before.”

“That’s what I was *afraid* you were going to say,” Skinner sighed as he sat down behind his desk. He had hoped Changing Woman would help solve the puzzle the stranger posed. But now it looked like he would have to wait for sundown to find out exactly what it was he had locked up in his jail.

.

The thing that used to be Silas woke up with meat on the brain.

The urge to taste warm, living flesh between his teeth was as urgent as a full bladder. There was no language, no emotion, no memory—nothing but the need to feed. All other thoughts and concerns were wiped away, enslaved to a hunger that was as boundless as it was unspeakable.

Silas got to his feet, wobbling like a freshly foaled colt, and took an unsteady step forward. He sniffed the stale, damp air of the mineshaft. There was no live meat here. He staggered up the tilted floor toward the entrance, which shone like a magic gate to his transformed eyes. He instinctively knew that where the darkness was as bright as noonday was where he could find live meat.

He stood at the mouth of the mine, his head tossed back like a hound catching scent. Snarling in hungry anticipation, he set off in the direction of the nearest prey, the drool pooling in his mouth and spilling from his lips in a steady stream.

.

The woman in white opened her eyes as the sun set behind the mountains and the cool of the evening replaced the heat of the day. She unfolded her hands and sat upright. Standing on the other side of the bars, arms folded, stood a ruggedly handsome man in his early thirties, dressed in a denim work shirt and pants and wearing a handmade tin star on his chest.

“Good evening, ma’am. The name’s Roy,” he said, with a tip of his Stetson. “Roy Skinner. I’m the sheriff around here. But you know that already. You also know I am what’s commonly known as a werewolf. Now, if you don’t mind me asking—what exactly are *you*, and what is your business in Limbo?”

“That’s what this place is called?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“How apropos,” she chuckled. “To answer the first part of your question—I am a vampire hunter.”

“Isn’t that a rather *odd* occupation, given your condition, Miss. . . ?”

“Mors. Perhaps. But I am not your usual vampire, Sheriff Skinner.” She reached up and began unbuttoning her blouse. “Allow me to demonstrate.”

“Now, wait a minute, lady!” Skinner protested, his cheeks turning red. “I’m a married man!”

“Don’t worry, I’m not trying to seduce you. I simply want to illustrate my point.” The vampire opened her shirtfront, exposing her torso. “Now, how many vampires have you seen walking around with one of *these*?”

Skinner stared in amazement at the thing the vampire wore between her pert, ivory-white breasts, his embarrassment overcome by astonishment. “What did you say your name was, again?”

“Mors,” she replied as she rebuttoned her shirt. “Pallida Mors. My friends call me Lida.”

“So I should call you. . . ?”

“Let’s keep it at ma’am for now, why don’t we? Now, as for why I am here in your delightful little village, I am tracking down a vampire who goes by the name of Varrick. He fled Santa Fe after I killed his minion—a ghoul.”

“Ghoul?” Roy grimaced at the thought. “I’ve heard about ’em, but I’ve never seen one.”

“You haven’t missed much. Varrick creates them to cover his

tracks. The ghoul abducts victims and brings them back to his lair. Once they have been drained, Varrick allows the ghoul to eat its fill of meat and dispose of the leftovers elsewhere. The abductions and deaths are usually blamed on random serial killers.”

Skinner gasped. “The Santa Fe Slasher!”

“Give the man a Kewpie doll!” Pallida drawled. “Varrick fled the city when he realized I was on to him. Perhaps he thought he could trick you into providing shelter to a fellow supernatural.”

“It’s your opinion, then, that he did not come here out of a genuine desire to give up his existence as a predator?”

“Are you kidding? Varrick *knows* I’m after him. The first thing he is going to do is make another ghoul to replace the one I destroyed, then he’s going to set about building a brood as fast as he can. In Santa Fe he let his ghoul devour his victims before they could resurrect. The situation here is different. He *needs* others of his own kind, ones he can control, to protect him.

“Varrick will immediately start remaking every human he can get his hands on in his own image. And with each conversion, his contagion spreads exponentially. In less than a week every human in the vicinity will be turned into vampires.”

Roy unlocked the cell, swinging the door open. “If what you say is true, then I need your help, and I suspect you just might need mine as well. That’s a real, um, interesting piece of jewelry you got there, ma’am,” Skinner said, nodding to her chest. “Care to tell me how you came into possession of it?”

“I got it the night I was attacked by a vampire—seventy-five years ago,” she replied. “His name was Varrick.”

“Do tell,” Skinner said, raising an eyebrow. “You and I need to talk. We can do that far more comfortably at my house. Besides, my wife should have dinner waiting, and I’m hungry enough to eat the tail off a hobby horse.”

.

Roy Skinner’s home was a whitewashed two-story adobe located near the Coyotero Tribal Center. A bedraggled chicken with

feathers the color of dirty laundry strutted about the front yard, clucking to itself. The otherwise rustic appearance of the building was offset by the solar panels affixed to its flat roof.

"Kasa!" Skinner called out. "Penny's loose again!"

The front door banged open and Kasa shot past her father and his guest, her ears flat against her skull.

"Sorry, Daddy! I'll get her!"

The chicken took off in a dead run, but was quickly snatched up by its owner.

"Henny-Penny is my daughter's pet," Skinner explained. "But she hates being cooped up, so to speak. She's always escaping and getting into the garden." He motioned to the neatly arranged rows of squash, corn, and other vegetables that occupied the backyard. "If my kids weren't so attached to the damned thing—and if she wasn't such a good layer—Penny would have ended up in the stew pot awhile back."

"How many children do you have?"

"A boy and a girl. Twins, actually." He looked around, sniffing the air. "Speaking of which—Kasa, where's your brother?"

"He's playing over at Spotted Pony's."

"You go on over to Spotted Pony's house and fetch him. I want both you young'uns close to home tonight."

"Yes, Daddy!" Kasa dashed off on her errand, clearing the low adobe fence in a single bound.

"Lord, that child loves to run," Skinner shook his head in paternal admiration. "You'd think she was part greyhound." He held the front door open and turned to look at his guest. Pallida stood in the dooryard, silently taking in the home garden and the clothesline full of laundry, a faraway look on her face. He removed his hat and motioned for her to come inside "Come on in and set a spell. I'll introduce you to my better half."

The interior of the Skinner home was cool and shady, organized around a wide hallway that ran down the middle of the house. The fifteen-inch-thick adobe walls were coated in softly hand-troweled stucco the color of buttercups. Peeled and

trimmed tree trunks served as the rafters for the twelve-foot-high ceiling in the great room. A fire was already crackling in the kiva fireplace in the corner, providing protection against the cold of the high desert night.

"Skin? That you? We're having chili *con carne* tonight."

An attractive young woman with brown skin and ebony hair stepped out of the kitchen, followed by the warm, welcoming smell of simmering spices and cornbread.

"I hope you don't mind me bringin' company, honey."

Bonnie froze, staring at the stranger in her house like a coyote bitch blocking the entrance of her den. "Is that her? The one you found in the barn?"

"Yes and no. She's the one I found in the barn—but she's not the vampire Changing Woman caught scent of."

Pallida stepped forward, smiling without showing her teeth. "My name is Pallida Mors. I'm pleased to meet you, Mrs. Skinner. It's quite a homestead you have here. I know all too well how hard it is to keep house in such a rustic setting."

Bonnie's gaze traveled up and down Pallida's body, from her designer sunglasses to her white boots and back again before she spoke. "Yes, well, it's all part of Skin's master plan for Limbo. Please excuse me," she said, with a smile that was more a show of teeth. "I have to get back to my cooking . . ."

"Don't worry about setting a place for me, Mrs. Skinner. I don't eat . . . chili." Pallida turned to Skinner. "I'm afraid your wife isn't quite sure whether she likes the idea of me being in her den."

"Please don't mind Bonnie, Miz Mors," Roy said as he unbuckled his gun belt and placed the holster inside the roll-top desk next to the fireplace. "I don't think you were quite what she was expecting."

"Believe me, it cuts both ways," Pallida chuckled. "A werewolf lawman with a wife and kids? I can honestly say I've never run across anything vaguely resembling you and your family before, Sheriff Skinner. If you don't mind, what, exactly,

did your wife mean when she said this house was all part of your master plan?"

"Limbo is designed to stay below radar," he explained. "That means remaining independent of the public power grids and other utilities. Doing without electricity, public sewers, and natural gas is easy enough for us weres. However, the same can't be said for our human friends. And, to be frank, many of us in the were community have become accustomed to the niceties of modern technology.

"That said, there is no electricity outside of the general store, and what few appliances we own are propane or kerosene powered, including the refrigerators. As you may have noticed on our walk over here, most of the homes in Limbo are equipped with solar panels, which are used to heat our water and charge batteries.

"Every home is outfitted with a rainwater harvesting system, used for bathing, cooking, and irrigation of private gardens. Most of the homesteads also have freshwater wells. Because of the critical importance of well water in such an arid climate, there are no septic tanks in Limbo.

"The majority of the homes within the town limits have been retrofitted with graywater systems, which recycle the wastewater generated by each household. By utilizing aerobic micro-organisms to biologically convert solid waste into fertilizer, each family is able to provide much of its own compost for their garden over the course of a year."

"You sound more like an architect than a lawman," Pallida said, shaking her head in admiration.

"Well, I *did* major in city-planning back in college," Roy admitted bashfully. "But I never *dreamed* I would be attempting to build a community from the ground up—especially not one like this."

The front door banged open and Kasa and her twin brother, Hoke, thundered into the house. Both children were grinning ear-to-ear; their eyes glowed like freshly minted gold coins.

"Mama! Daddy!" the twins chimed. "King's back!"

A shaggy, four-legged shape the size of a young adult bear stood on the front porch. The beast lifted its massive head and thumped its tail in greeting, red tongue lolling from the corner of its mouth like velvet sash.

Roy grinned and knelt before the creature, scratching it behind the ears. "You old bastard! Where've you been, boy? Out huntin' antelope and bighorn in the high country again?"

As Pallida stepped forward to join Skinner, the great beast's hackle rose and a low, throaty growl rumbled in its chest.

"She's okay, King!" Roy took a double handful of the animal's nape so that they were eye-to-eye. "She's a *friend*," he said, stressing the last word. He motioned for Pallida to draw closer. "Miz Mors, I'd like you to meet King. He's one of my closest and most trusted friends. King, say hello to the nice lady."

King looked at Roy, then back at Pallida, before offering his front paw. Pallida's eyebrows lifted when she saw the opposable thumb.

"You didn't mention there was a half-wolf amongst your number. Your friend is *very* rare, indeed."

"Yes, I'm aware of the Werewolf Eugenics Council's stand on half-wolves," Roy said with a sigh. "They don't want them polluting their precious pedigrees. Werewolves mating with true wolves is viewed as bestiality."

"And werewolves raping humans is normal?" she shot back.

"I don't *agree* with their policies, I only know of them," Skinner said firmly. "I'd appreciate it if you would remember that."

"You're right, Sheriff. I spoke out of turn. Please forgive me."

Bonnie stuck her head out of the kitchen. "Kasa! Hoke! Go wash your paws. You too, King! Dinner's ready!"

.

Neal McClain was awakened by the sound of horses screaming. He looked to Little Bird's side of the bed, and then remembered she and their son had gone to stay with relatives on the reservation. The incident with the stranger in the barn had spooked

his wife in a way nothing else in this strange land had before.

Nine years ago, while on a rare trip to Albuquerque, Roy Skinner had spotted a band of young toughs in a culvert kicking around what looked like a scarecrow. The scarecrow was Neal. Roy scared off the punks and offered to drop him off at the hospital. Neal begged him not to because there was bench warrant out on him for drunk and disorderly.

So instead of leaving him to die in a ditch of internal injuries, Roy took Neal back to Limbo, where he was nursed back to health by a collection of Native Americans, social rejects, werewolves, and were-coyotes. Neal had not left Limbo since, outside of a brief foray into the Navajo Nation to find a wife.

In the years since Roy Skinner had dragged him out of the culvert, Neal McClain had achieved more than he had ever dreamed possible. He had a home, a wife, a son, friends, neighbors, and a respected place in his community. While he wasn't living the life of a Rajah, he had enough livestock and food to provide for his family and their simple needs, which was pretty damn good for a down-and-out drunk who used to live under a highway overpass. And he would be damned if some vampire was going to scare him off his land.

He threw back the blankets, snatching up the pair of pants draped over the foot of the bed. He grabbed the loaded thirty-aught he kept behind the front door and hurried out across the yard. The noise coming from the barn was horrific. The last time he heard animals make such a sound was when he'd worked as day labor at a dog food factory. He remembered it had taken a gallon of Mad Dog to wash the echoes of the mustangs' screams from his head.

As he drew closer, Neal saw that the barn doors were standing wide open. Cloverleaf, his prize mare, suddenly bolted out into the yard, her eyes rolling in terror. Neal leapt out of the way, narrowly avoiding being trampled by the frightened horse as it fled into the night.

"Who's there? Show yourself! I got a gun!" he shouted as he

stepped inside the barn. He could barely hear his own voice over the frantic lowing of the agitated cattle and the horses and mules kicking at their stable doors. He pulled out his flashlight and played the beam around the interior of the barn. Panicked livestock stared back at him, their eyes showing white. He focused the flashlight beam on Cloverleaf's stall. The mare had reduced the slats to splinters in her escape.

He then pointed the light at the next stall over, which housed one of his plow mules. At first he thought it was empty as well, but then he saw a dark bulk sprawled in the hay. He moved closer to get a better look, and saw that the poor beast's mouth hung open, its tongue dangling to one side, bloody froth covering its muzzle. As the beam of the flashlight played across the dying mule's glazing eyes, Silas Samuels raised his head, his face smeared with blood and straw, and hissed at the rancher like an angry possum.

Neal cried out in alarm and dropped the flashlight. Never in his life, not even during his days hanging out drinking hooch under the overpass, had he seen such bestial hunger in a fellow man's eyes. It was as if every last vestige of humanity had been stripped away from the old prospector, leaving only stark, staring madness.

"Stay where you are, Silas!" Neal said as he leveled his gun at the gore-covered figure crouched before him. "I don't want to shoot you, but I will if I have to!"

Silas grinned up at Neal, bloody drool dripping from his quivering lips. The flesh of the mule was good, but nowhere as tender as the flesh of a man. The ghoul no more knew why this was true any more than a bird knows why it's warmer down south. But as the thought of eating the man crossed the dark, cold clay of his mind, the ghoul felt something twitch in his hindbrain. Something that told him that the man was not meant to feed his hunger, but was destined for another's need.

.

Bonnie and Roy cleared the after-dinner dishes from the table while the twins finished their homework. After checking Hoke's math and Kasa's biology papers, Bonnie escorted the twins to bed. Roy dispensed good night kisses to his son and daughter, then returned to the great room, to find his guest seated in a chair, staring at the fire in the kiva, her chin resting on steepled fingers. The half-wolf, King, was sprawled before her feet like a bearskin rug.

"I'm impressed," Roy said. "King doesn't normally relax in front of strangers."

"We understand each other," Pallida said simply. "He knows I pose no threat to the pack. In fact, he cut short his hunting trip because he caught wind of Varrick."

"How did you figure that out?" Roy asked half-jokingly. "Read his mind?"

"To a certain degree," Pallida replied. "You are right. There is much we have to discuss if we are to work together. I'm interested in learning more about you and this town of yours."

"Why don't you just read my mind? That would save some time, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it would, but I doubt you would find the experience very pleasant. The difference between you and King is that King doesn't have an id, ego, or super-ego. He simply is what he is. That makes reading his mind far less intrusive. Besides, I would rather hear it from you. Tell me about yourself, Roy Skinner."

Skinner shrugged his shoulders and sat down in a chair opposite his guest. "If you insist. But, remember, you asked for it. I was born a werewolf, but I was raised human. I don't know who my biological parents are. When I was a year old, I was adopted by the people I grew up believing to be my parents: Bill and Edna Skinner.

"The Skinners cherished me as only those who know the true value of a child can. I never once doubted their love for me, no matter what. They knew I was different from other children, but it never changed how they felt toward me. Like most weres

reared amongst humans, I had a hard time being accepted by my peers, and was often the butt of cruel jokes and vicious pranks. I could have become embittered and twisted, like so many others of my kind, but the love of my parents kept me strong.

"I never knew how incredibly lucky I was to have been adopted by the Skinners until I went out into the world and met others like myself who had known nothing but abuse at the hands of humans. My mother, rest her soul, loved me even after she discovered the truth. I was only ten years old at the time . . ."

Skinner fell silent and his gaze became distant, as if he were looking at something far away. After a few seconds he swallowed hard and resumed speaking, but there was a hitch in his voice.

"My father took me deer hunting. When I bagged my first buck, he said it was rite of passage, marking my transition from boy into man. He blooded my cheeks—smearing my face with the fresh viscera of the deer I had brought down. And, without meaning to, I *changed* for the first time in my life.

"My mother found me crouched over his dead body, gnawing on his carcass like a rabid beast. Instead of killing me for the monster I was, she took me home, cleaned me up, and protected me, not only from others, but from myself as well. I was all she had left, and she didn't want to lose me, too. I had no memory of what I had done until I shape-shifted for the first time as an adult.

"When I discovered the truth about myself, I decided to find others of my kind. I thought I might fit in better with werewolves than I did with humans. But I discovered that I could never truly fit in amongst them, either. The purebred werewolves I fell in with were ravenous, blood-drunk maniacs who used humans to sate their basest appetites. Faced with the possibility of centuries of life as a cannibal and serial rapist, I was on the verge of suicide . . .

"It wasn't until I met my wife's people, the Coyotero, that I realized there was hope for myself. The Coyotero know how

to live in balance with their world and those who share it with them. That is why werewolf society hates them so.

"The Coyotero taught me that just because I have wild blood in my veins, that does not mean I must live like a beast. The were-coyotes have co-existed in relative harmony with the native peoples of the Southwest for millennia. While they might eat the occasional human now and again, their relationship with the desert tribes has been largely benevolent—hence the importance of the trickster-god Coyote in Native American mythology.

"Thanks to the Coyotero I saw how it was possible for human and supernaturals to live together, work together, and fight together against a common enemy. I know from personal experience that the role of monster is a cruel one. To live the life of a predator means you can never truly be at peace, either with the world or yourself. You are constantly on the prowl, fearful of exposure or challenges from more powerful, deadlier predators.

"All the shadow races play at being human, but not all of us do so just to prey upon the flock. Some of us do so simply because we dream of having a family and a home and a place in a society where we can live without fear.

"Limbo was born of that dream. We have worked hard to make this a place where human lives beside werewolf, where werewolf hunts alongside were-coyote. Any supernatural who has wearied of the endless cycle of hiding and killing and living in fear is welcome to join us and start a new life, one free of predation and exploitation. We hope as word of what we're doing spreads amongst the underground that more and more supernaturals will find their way to us. In fact, there are those on the council who still believe we owe this Varrick a fair hearing."

"Believe me when I tell you, Sheriff Skinner: never trust a vampire."

"Does that include you?" Roy asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"Yes," she answered. "I could not hunt and destroy these creatures like I do if I did not carry some of their darkness inside me. I can be a very dangerous woman, Sheriff, even when

I don't wish to be."

"Perhaps that is true," Roy said with a shrug. "But I have learned to trust my instincts when it comes to people, whether they're human or not."

"And what do your instincts say about me?"

"That you're conflicted. And I have no doubt in my mind that you can be lethal. But, basically, I believe you are a decent sort. Whatever that sort may be."

Before he could continue, a muffled ringing sound came from the roll-top desk.

"Excuse me. It's the hotline," Roy explained, levering himself out of his chair. "We don't have telephone service, per se, but there are a few Army-issue field telephones scattered amongst the older human citizens. My phone rings automatically the minute someone on the other end picks up their receiver." He rolled the cover of the desk back and pulled an old-fashioned telephone receiver from an olive-drab canvas case. "Sheriff speaking." Skinner frowned, as if having trouble identifying the voice on the other end. "Mrs. Connors—? Is that you? What? I'll be right out! Daisy, I need you to lock your doors and stay away from the windows. Do you hear me? Don't let *anyone* in until I get there! Now stay put—help's on the way." He glanced up at Pallida as he returned the receiver to its case. "Daisy Connors says there's something in her chicken coop and, whatever it is, it's laughing."

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The Connors place was a small parcel located a mile or so up the road from Neal McClain's spread. A couple of weeks ago, Daisy's husband of forty-seven years, Kerwin, died of gut cancer, leaving her to raise chickens and candle eggs on her own. As Roy pulled up in front of the Connors' house, King leapt out of the back of the vehicle. The half-wolf loped over to the chicken coop then went on-point, like a bird dog in the presence of hidden quail, his teeth bared and hackles raised from nape to tail.

Taking his gun from its holster, Skinner motioned for Pallida to flank him as he kicked open the door. He glanced inside and grimaced.

"Whatever was after Daisy's chickens has flown the coop. No pun intended."

"Could it have been an animal?" Pallida asked.

"You tell me," he said, motioning for her to look inside.

The walls of the coop were coated with blood, matted feathers, and the dripping yolks of shattered eggs. Chicken carcasses, fifty in all, lay scattered about like gory feather dusters. Each and every bird was missing its head. The nesting boxes were overturned and what few eggs not hurled against the walls had been trodden underfoot. Pallida turned to speak to Roy, but he was already running toward the farmhouse.

"Mrs. Connors! It's me—Sheriff Skinner!"

As he stepped onto the porch, he could see the front door was hanging from busted hinges. Whatever had raided the chicken coop had kicked open the door, despite the heavy crossbar. All the furniture in the front room was smashed to kindling. Skinner dashed into the kitchen and then into the bedroom, only to find each dark and empty.

He returned to see Pallida standing in the middle of the demolished furnishings, studying a shattered piece of Blue Willow china she had picked up off the floor.

"She's gone," he said, trying to keep the fear from his voice.

"Varrick's minion has claimed her for his master," Pallida said. "If your friend is lucky, she'll die of a heart attack before the bastard has a chance to feed."

"Damn it! This ain't how it's supposed to be!" Skinner spat, kicking the gutted remains of the Connors' sofa. "I promised them a safe place for humans and supernaturals alike, and they trusted me!"

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Sheriff," Pallida said. "There's no undoing what has been done here. Once Varrick converts a few humans, though, you can kiss your little attempt at utopia

goodbye. We've got to find his lair and take him out before he can surround himself with others. But where to begin? This territory is full of abandoned mines and old graveyards . . ."

"Mines?" Roy took his hat off and hurled it to the floor. "*Damn it!* The old copper mine! I was there earlier today, just before I got the call about Neal's barn. I *knew* something was wrong out there, but I just couldn't put my finger on it. *Damn it!* I should have followed my instincts and gone into that fucking mine! If I had, this never would have happened!"

"Chances are you would have simply gotten yourself killed. Being a werewolf isn't much help in a vampire's lair—especially if he's got a minion with him. And judging from the mess in the coop, our friend didn't waste any time replacing his ghoul."

"Do you think there's a chance Daisy's still alive?"

She shook her head sadly. "The only humans they keep alive are psychics, who can serve as their watchdogs during the day. Unless your Mrs. Connors is a telepath or clairvoyant, her only use to Varrick is as an addition to his brood."

Skinner shook his head. "Her late husband was a medium, but Daisy's just plain ol' human. Silas probably didn't know Mr. Connors was dead; that's why he came here. You're the vampire hunter—what do we do now?"

"We wait for the sun. There's no point in trying to find him before then. As long as he remains underground, Varrick is capable of moving about during daylight hours. If he's not asleep during the day, he'll at least be sluggish, as will whatever by-blows he's got down there with him."

"Political correctness be damned. I'm rounding up the rest of the humans tonight and bringin' 'em inside the perimeter for the duration. I'm not gonna let that son of a bitch claim another life on my watch. Filthy bloodsucker! Uh, no offense, ma'am."

"None taken, Sheriff."

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As dawn arrived, two vehicles pulled up to the old abandoned copper mine. The first was the Wrangler, with Roy at the wheel and Pallida riding shotgun, King wedged in between them. The second vehicle was a pick-up truck, containing Uncle Johnny and Sis, with Tully riding in the bed.

Roy hopped out of the Jeep and cupped his hands to his mouth. "Silas!" he shouted. "Where are you?"

"I doubt he will answer," Pallida said, looking around the abandoned mining site. "From what you've told me, your friend was probably Varrick's earliest victim."

"I still have to try and find him," Roy replied as he mounted the stairs to the cabin. "His safety is my responsibility."

"Any sign of him?" Uncle Johnny called from the truck.

Skinner shook his head. "His cot doesn't look like it's been slept in." He hurried back down to join the others. As he reached the bottom of the stairs he saw something brownish-gold moving out of the corner of his eye. As he turned toward it, his mother-in-law rose up onto her hind legs, her three rows of teats barely visible through the thick fur covering her belly.

"Good morning, Changing Woman," Roy said evenly. "I see you've chosen to join us."

"Of course. You are my daughter's mate, werewolf or not. I would not allow you to go into battle alone. And, to speak straight, I have my doubts about your new friend." She gestured with a talon at Pallida, who was busy talking to Uncle Johnny.

"What about her?"

"I do not trust her. There is a shadow on her soul, one that waxes and wanes like the phases of the moon. Some times her face shines, other times it is in eclipse."

"Could you say that a little louder? I don't think she can hear you from where she's standing!" Roy snapped. "Look, if she was going to kill me, she could have done it several times by now. Jesus, Mom—one of these days you're going to *have* to learn to trust other species!"

"I remember how this land was before the white man," she

replied curtly. "Speak to me of trusting strangers in another century or two."

Exasperated, Skinner turned on his heel and went to where the others were gathered, trying to ignore the burning in his ears.

"You're mother's right," Pallida said. There was no trace of anger or insult in her voice. "There is no reason for her to trust me. For all she knows, I'm one of Varrick's minions leading you into a cleverly orchestrated death trap."

"Are you?" Skinner asked, arching an eyebrow.

"No," she replied. "But I *could* be. You never can tell—whether it's with people or things that pretend to be people. Now let's get this show on the road."

As they neared the mouth of the mine, Uncle Johnny grimaced. "Christ A'mighty! You smell that?"

"Yeah," Roy replied through clenched teeth.

"Smell what?" Sis asked, looking confused. "All I smell is dirt and machine oil."

"Sorry, girl," Uncle Johnny said. "I forgot your nose isn't as keen as ours. Even Tully's picked up on it." He nodded toward the young ogre, whose nostrils flared like a nervous pony's.

"Bad. Bad in dark," Tully rumbled anxiously.

"It's the odor of nesting undead," Pallida explained. "That means there's more than one down there."

"Miz Mors and I are going in," Skinner said grimly. "Uncle Johnny, Changing Woman—I want you to wait here with Sis and Tully. If anything comes out, I want y'all to blast it. Understand?"

"Gotcha," Uncle Johnny said as he broke open his shotgun and slid a couple of cartridges into the breach.

"Whatever you do, make sure you shoot it in the head," Pallida explained. "It doesn't matter whether you're using regular buckshot or the silver loads. If you blow out its brains, it gets dead and stays dead. If you can't manage a headshot, try for the spine. Cutting them in two won't kill them, but it'll slow

them down.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Uncle Johnny snapped his shotgun back together. “Here, you better take this with you, Skin,” he said, handing Roy a flashlight. “I realize you don’t have much trouble getting around in the dark, but there’s a limit to even werewolf night-vision.”

“Thanks, Johnny,” Roy said, hefting the flashlight in salute.

As they moved toward the yawning mouth of the incline shaft that lead into the mine, King dropped into step behind them. Roy turned and shook his head.

“No. You can’t come with me this time, big guy. You’ve gotta stay here with Uncle Johnny and the others.”

King made a snuffling noise and shook his head, ears flapping like stubby wings.

“You heard me. I said *no*!” Roy’s tone was stern and loud, as if he were talking to a Labrador retriever that insisted on following him to school. “You can’t come with me!”

King’s ears drooped and his shoulders slumped, but he remained in place.

Once inside the mine, the two followed the narrow-gauge tracks that once ran the ore cars through the tunnels. Skinner glanced over his shoulder and saw the half-wolf framed against the daylight, anxiously watching after them.

“Damn hard-headed beast,” he sighed.

“He’s extremely loyal,” Pallida commented, not without some admiration. “You are lucky to have him as a friend.”

“He’s more than a friend; he’s family,” Roy explained. “And I don’t mean it in the way people usually do when they talk about their pets. He’s a cousin or something. Good Lord—what’s that stink?”

As Skinner swung the flashlight in the direction of the reek, its beam reflected off the peeled skull of a burro.

“That’s Sookie, Silas’s pack animal, or at least what’s left of her.” He grimaced and looked away. “Did—did that Varrick asshole do this?”

“Judging from the puncture wounds on the animal’s throat, I’d say he was responsible for part of it. Most of the damage was done by a ghoul. They’re equal opportunity carnivores. Horses, chickens, pigs, dogs, humans—whatever. They prefer living meat, but they’ll eat the dead if there’s nothing better on hand.” She glanced around at the numerous side tunnels that branched off the main shaft. “I wouldn’t be surprised if the ghoul wasn’t using these passageways to excavate bodies from the local graveyard . . .”

“He wouldn’t have to go that far,” Skinner replied. “This mine is one huge tomb. There was a cave-in in one of the lower galleries back in the thirties that trapped at least fifty miners. The company decided it was more cost-effective to leave them there rather than excavate them. Not long after that they closed down the mine for good.”

“How quaint,” Pallida grunted. “No wonder Varrick chose this place to nest in. Vampires are drawn to scenes of human misery like flies to shit.”

As they moved farther into the mine, the incline grew steeper and the atmosphere increasingly close. “God, the air’s stale down here,” Skinner grumbled, coughing into his fist.

“That doesn’t mean much to Varrick. He doesn’t need to breathe like living things do.”

Skinner paused and tilted his head to one side like a hound. “Do you hear that?”

Pallida stood still, lending her ears as well. “Yes,” she whispered in reply. “It’s coming from over there.” She pointed to one of the side tunnels.

Roy pointed the flashlight, and its beam revealed a nightmare: a pallid figure, naked save for the bushy beard framing its face and the blood and chicken feathers smeared across its chest and thighs, squatted on its haunches in the tunnel, gnawing on a human thighbone.

Roy stepped forward. “Silas—!”

The ghoul bared his teeth at the intruders, spittle and blood

dripping from his curled lips.

Pallida grabbed Skinner's arm, but it was too late. The ghoul leapt at the sheriff, swinging the thighbone like a crazed caveman, knocking the flashlight from Skinner's hand. The passageway was plunged into darkness deeper than any grave.

The ghoul's powerful hands closed upon the sheriff's throat, bearing him to the ground with a strength beyond mere madness.

Suddenly the ghoul's face contorted in pain. His blood-wet mouth opened wide in an agonized shriek as he was dragged backward down the tunnel. As Skinner sat up, he saw King attacking Silas, the half-wolf's powerful jaws locked onto the ghoul's hind leg. King whipped his massive head back and forth, shaking his captive like a terrier would a rat. The ghoul yowled and plunged the broken end of the thighbone into King's shoulder.

The half-wolf yelped in pain and let go of his prey. The ghoul quickly got to his feet and disappeared into the darkness, dragging his savaged leg behind him. Pallida dashed after the wounded thing.

"Let him go!" Skinner shouted. "You don't have a weapon."

Pallida paused long enough to shoot Skinner a crooked smile before disappearing down the tunnel in pursuit of the fleeing ghoul. "Oh, yes I do."

Skinner shook his head and turned his attention to King. The half-wolf lay on his side, panting in pain. Skinner gripped the makeshift spear and pulled it free with a single tug. King turned to lick the wound, whimpering like a pup on the tit.

"Damn it, boy! I told you to stay put!" Skinner said as he saw to his friend's shoulder. He tore a strip of cloth from his own shirt to dress the wound. King licked Skinner's face as he bandaged him.

"Don't try making up to me right now," Roy said sternly, pushing the half-wolf's muzzle away. "You disobeyed a direct order. Now go back up top and *stay* there!"

"Take this with you when you go."

Roy was startled by Pallida's sudden reappearance. One second she wasn't there, the next she was standing at his elbow, holding Silas's severed head by the hair like a lantern. She tossed the gruesome souvenir between the half-wolf's paws. King eagerly snatched it up, careful not to tear the skin with his fangs, and trotted off like a dog with a new chew toy.

"It was a quick enough death, as such things go," she reassured him. "Your friend felt very little, assuming anything of him remained inside that creature. Are you okay?"

"I'll live," Roy wheezed, massaging his bruised throat.

"We're close to the nest. I can feel it," she said. "I can take over from here. You go back up top with King."

"No. This is *my* town. I am the law here. It is *my* responsibility to see that justice is done."

"Nobody would think less of you for letting me take care of this, Sheriff. You have a wife and kids depending on you."

"That's exactly why I can't turn tail."

Pallida nodded her head in acknowledgement. "Suit yourself. It's your jurisdiction."

"Which way do we go, then?"

"This way," Pallida said, gesturing in the direction the ghoul had fled. "Wounded minions invariably head for their masters. For some deluded reason they think they'll protect them."

"Do they?"

"Nah. Usually they just kill them."

"Do you think he knows we're down here?"

"Oh, he knows, all right. They *always* know when you kill one of their posse. So be on your toes."

The narrow passageway eventually opened onto a large gallery, the solid rock ceiling of which had been carved into the rough semblance of a cathedral. The air was foul and heavy with moisture from the seeping walls.

"How far—how far down do you think we are?" Roy gasped, bending over to catch his breath.

"I'd say at least four, maybe five thousand feet," she replied.

"And I don't care if you swore a blood oath on a stack of bibles ten feet tall—I'm not taking you any farther than this. You need air: Varrick doesn't."

"What about you?"

Pallida shrugged her shoulders. "I can take it or leave it."

There was a sound of loose pebbles sliding underfoot. Skinner froze.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered.

"Yeah," she replied. "They're close."

"*Sheriff . . .*" The voice was frail and querulous, sounding frightened and lost in the darkness. "*Help me, Roy . . .*"

"That's Daisy Connors! She's still alive!" Skinner said, his voice tinged with hope.

Pallida shook her head. "It just *sounds* like her."

"You don't know that for sure," he shot back. "Besides, doesn't it take three days and nights for a human to resurrect as a vampire?"

"Who told you that—Peter Cushing?" Pallida spat in disgust. "We're not talking a set of rules like Monopoly. Sometimes it only takes a few hours for the host body to be taken over."

The scrambling sound returned as a figure dressed in a filthy, tattered housecoat lurched out of one of the connecting tunnels. The old woman groped her way through the darkness, her arms extended in front of her like a child playing blind man's bluff.

"Sheriff Skinner . . . where are you? It's so dark . . . I can't see anything. Where am I? I'm afraid! Please . . . I want to go home."

"It's okay, Daisy." Skinner smiled comfortingly at the old woman, even though there was no way she could possibly see it in the darkness. "You're safe now."

The look of fear and confusion on Mrs. Connors's face disappeared, replaced by a demonic grin. Her eyes gleamed in the dark like those of a sewer rat as her dentures flew out of her mouth, displaced by fangs that popped from her barren gums like spring-loaded darts.

"God damn it!" Pallida snarled as she pulled the werewolf free of the vampire's clutches.

The white-clad vampire hunter threw her arms around Mrs. Connors, hugging her like a long lost friend. There was a brief burst of pure, white light, and for a moment it seemed to Roy as if a sunbeam had somehow found its way into the depths of the mine. Mrs. Connors gave an inhuman screech and dropped to the ground, where she twitched and flopped like a shark on a hook. The old woman's torso began to smolder, and then abruptly burst into flame. Within seconds the body was consumed by the fire, leaving only her head and extremities untouched. As Skinner watched, the vampire's face turned once more into that of the kindly old woman he'd once known.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," Pallida said, genuine regret in her voice. "I realize she was a friend. Normally they just turn to ash, but there's not enough oxygen down here for her to be truly consumed."

"That's okay," Roy said as he swallowed the bile crowding the back of his throat. "She's at peace now." He glanced at Pallida's pristine white duster, shaking his head in disbelief. "At least she didn't ruin your clothes."

"My clothes are *always* this white," Pallida replied matter-of-factly. "No matter what color I put on." She put her hands on her hips and scowled defiantly at the surrounding darkness. "Screw this sneaking around in the dark!" the vampire hunter snarled. "*We* know he's down here, *he* knows we're down here, and *he* knows that *we* know he's down here!" She threw back her head, arms opened wide, as if inviting attack, and shouted at the cathedral-like dome overhead. "Varrick!"

The vampire's name echoed throughout the tunnels honeycombing the mountainside.

"Show yourself, you bastard!"

Suddenly a voice spoke in the darkness, although it was impossible for Roy to pinpoint exactly where it was coming from.

"I see you brought the local law with you. I'm quaking in

my boots.”

“You’d *better* be,” Skinner growled. “Now show yourself like the lady asked!”

“As you wish, Sheriff,” Varrick chuckled.

A tall, gaunt figure dressed in the tattered remains of a fashionable Italian suit, now grimed with mud and gore, stepped out from behind a nearby outcropping. Varrick’s face was as pale as a winter moon, save for his lips, which were full and wetly red, as if he had just feasted on fresh raspberries. His cheekbones were as sharp as the blade of a knife and he wore his dark hair in a pigtail that was so long it was coiled about his shoulders like a pet python. As Varrick nervously dry-washed his hands, Skinner could see the vampire’s fingernails were as long as knitting needles.

“Your little escape plan didn’t turn out as expected,” Pallida said. “You’ve got more than me to contend with now.”

“When are you going to grow weary of chasing me, woman?” Varrick snarled.

“I’ll stop chasing you when you stop running away,” she replied.

“Run away?” I’m no more scared of you than I am the pathetic human you’ve dragged down here to his death!” the vampire sneered, gesturing to Skinner.

Pallida gave a humorless laugh and shook her head in disbelief. “I wouldn’t be so sure of that. Take a gander at my buddy again.”

Varrick frowned, baffled by Pallida’s response, and took another, longer look at Skinner. The vampire’s eyes suddenly widened in alarm and he hissed like a frightened cat. “*Werewolf!*”

“That’s right, Varrick!” Pallida grinned. “You queered your own game before it had a chance to get started. You brought your sick little road show into the middle of pack territory. There’s only room in this county for *one* species of super-predator—and these guys call dibs!”

Varrick stepped back, a look of angry disbelief on his

sallow features. "Kill them!" he shouted at no one in particular. "Destroy them!"

The cavern floor underneath Skinner's feet exploded in a shower of dirt as a hand, the fingers as white as grubs, burst through the soil and grabbed his shin. As the loose dirt sloughed away, Skinner saw Neal McClain's pale face grinning up at him. The rancher's eyes were red as traffic lights and his canines were long and curved like a wild cat's fangs.

"Let go of him!" Pallida snarled, punting Neal McClain's head like a place-kicker going for a goal. Her boot smashed the vampire's skull as if it were a rotten watermelon.

A second figure, dressed in the half-shell helmet and elbow-pads of an extreme sports biker, lurched from one of the other tunnels, fangs bared. Pallida once again threw her arms around the newborn vampire. The former mountain biker bleated like a frightened goat and collapsed into a pile of twitching, smoking limbs.

As she spun to face Varrick, the vampire shrieked and disappeared into one of the many passageways. Pallida bounded after him like a hound after a fox, pursuing him through the perpetual midnight of the tunnels until the passageway opened onto yet another underground gallery.

Pallida looked around, but there was no sign of her prey. As she moved farther into the gallery her foot struck something made of metal. She looked down and spotted a pickaxe and a large canvas bag lying on the ground. *Property of Silas Samuels* was stenciled across the bag in big block letters. She frowned and gave the bag a tentative kick. As Pallida stared in surprise at the contents that spilled from the prospector's sample bag, Varrick dropped behind her from the ceiling and put her in a hammerlock.

"You ungrateful little bitch!" the vampire lord snarled into his captive's ear. "I give you the gift of eternal unlife, and how do you repay me? By chasing me from pillar to post for decades, as if I were vermin to be exterminated! You even bring a damned

werewolf into my lair! As if slaying me will change what you are. There can be great pleasure in pain. At least I have found so." A perverted smile crossed the vampire's overripe lips as one of his hands moved to fondle Pallida's breasts. "Perhaps you'll enjoy it as well . . ."

The vampire's dirty-old-man chuckle turned into an agonized scream as his hand burst into flame. Varrick staggered backward, letting go of Pallida, as his right hand burned to charcoal and snapped off at the wrist. The vampire stared in disbelief at the outline of a crucifix between Pallida's breasts, glowing through her clothes like a vision from on high.

"How is it possible?" Varrick gasped. "You're one of us—!"

Pallida shook her head, a grim smile on her face. "Not of my choice." Before Varrick could react, she snared him in her arms, pressing the vampire against her in a tight embrace.

As he struggled to free himself, she whispered the words she had waited to say for seventy-five years: "This is for Daniel."

Varrick screamed as he caught fire. Pallida watched, her face unreadable, as the dying vampire staggered and then dropped to his knees, consumed by a purifying flame no water could quench or blanket smother.

She had waited more than a lifetime to deliver justice in the name of her dead husband. As she bowed her head in thanks, her thoughts went back to what had happened in that lonely farmhouse in the middle of nowhere.

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Although the Dust Bowl threatened to engulf their Kansas farm, she and her husband were very happy and very much in love. Her name was not Pallida yet. That would come later. Life was a struggle, but she and her husband, Daniel, knew they could face it, as long as they were together.

That night was like any other. They had just sat down to a humble dinner of beans and corn pone when the dust storm hit. As the wind howled about the eaves and tore at the shingles,

they heard someone outside calling for help. Thinking it might be a neighbor caught in the storm her husband opened the front door.

What entered their home wasn't a farmer seeking shelter from the suffocating dust, but a red-eyed fiend from the very pits of Hell. Within seconds Daniel was dead, his neck broken. Then the vampire she would, decades later, identify as Varrick turned his deadly attention to her, burying his fangs into her throat.

The next thing she knew, she woke up on the floor. The first thing she saw was her husband's dead body, still sprawled nearby, partially buried in a drift of wind-driven topsoil that had been blown through the open door. Two realizations entered her mind at the same time: the vampire who had attacked them was gone, and she was dying.

The thought of becoming such a creature filled her with a horrible dread. Fearing for her immortal soul, she crawled across the room to where the silver crucifix her parents had given her hung upon the wall. As she dragged herself across the rough-hewn floor, she could feel the vampire's evil seed starting to blossom, her life force ebbing. Soon it would spread throughout her, filling her with its darkness as it claimed her body for its own.

She nearly swooned as she reached up to remove the cross from the wall, and for a second she feared she was truly lost. She caught sight of Daniel's body, lying there like a toy broken by an angry child. As she cried out in despair, she felt her husband's strong arm slip about her waist and shore up her wobbly legs, like he always did whenever they went ice skating on the winter pond.

With the last breath in her body, she took the silver crucifix from the wall and pressed it to her chest. The evil change was already upon her, and the cross's touch seared her flesh like a white-hot poker, but she refused to let go until it had driven out the darkness inside her, turning her hair as white as milk and transforming her into something not quite of one world, nor of

the other, but forever in between.

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“Miz Mors—where are you?”

Pallida blinked, drawn from her reverie by the sound of Skinner’s voice echoing through the mineshaft.

“I’m over here, Sheriff!” she shouted.

A few seconds later Skinner emerged from one of the tunnels. His clothing was torn and dirty, but he was otherwise unharmed. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“What about Varrick?”

She pointed to the smoldering remains at her foot. They were all that was left of the creature that had destroyed her life, as well as countless others over the last century.

“I thought I smelled something burning,” Skinner grunted.

As the sheriff poked at the charred bits of bone with his boot, Pallida handed him Silas Samuels’s sample bag.

“What kind of mine did you say this used to be?” she asked.

“Copper,” Skinner replied. “But it’s been played out for years.”

“I wouldn’t say that. If I’m not mistaken, that’s gold ore.”

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“Thank you for your help, Miz Mors,” Skinner said. The sun had yet to rise and the mountain air was crisp enough that his words were accompanied by little puffs of steam.

“Poor ol’ Silas,” Uncle Johnny said from the front porch of the general store. “He spent his entire life lookin’ for the mother lode.”

Pallida stood beside Uncle Johnny’s truck, one hand resting on the door handle. Sis was seated behind the wheel, Tully huddled in the bed like a concrete Buddha, waiting for everyone to finish their good-byes before driving the white-clad woman back to civilization.

Pallida flashed a smile as she clasped Roy’s hand in her

own. "You're a good man, Roy Skinner, werewolf or not. I wish you good luck with your town and your family."

"You don't have to leave, you know," Skinner suggested. "You're more than welcome to stay."

"Are you sure about that? You haven't seen me on one of my bad days. There is something like Varrick in me, as well."

"You're not telling any of us something we don't already know," Skinner said with a sad laugh. "There is something dark in each and every one of us here, human and supernatural alike. But we have all made the decision not to allow it to rule our lives. Sometimes we succeed, and sometimes we fail. But at least we try. You and I are not so different, Pallida. We both fight to maintain our decency in the face of monstrosity. And, in the end, that is all any of us has got. Besides, now that you've finally gotten rid of the vampire you've been hunting since the New Deal, what else have you got to do to fill your time?"

"That thought *has* crossed my mind," she admitted.

"You know, Limbo is going to have its hands full trying to figure out what to do with a brand spanking new gold mine," Skinner had with a smile.

A thoughtful look crossed Pallida's face. "You know, it would be interesting to see how this little cross-species city plan of yours works out. Sheriff Skinner . . . do you have a deputy?"

"No. But I'm looking to hire one."

"Well, that's something to think about, isn't it?" Pallida smiled as she climbed in beside Sis. "Perhaps I'll take you up on that invitation some day."

"It's a date," Skinner said, touching the brim of his hat. "Y'all come back."

Sis threw the truck into gear and the pick-up jounced its way down the dirt road that passed for Limbo's main street, headed in the direction of Santa Fe.

Roy watched until they disappeared from sight before turning his gaze up at the star-filled sky. Limbo had faced the first true threat to its existence, and it had survived the

encounter. He was not so naive as to believe it would be the last. Maybe the next danger would wear a human face; maybe it would have no face at all. In any case, it would have to deal with him—and, perhaps, his new deputy—if it wanted to start trouble in his town.

He tossed his head back, sniffed the brisk pre-dawn air, and caught the scent of sausage links frying in the pan coming from his house. He grinned as he dropped down onto all fours and loped back to his home, his wife, and his children, tongue lolling in anticipation of breakfast.



THE CHANGE

Ramsey Campbell

Ramsey Campbell has long championed the horror genre's potential to be more than just popular entertainment, and the undeniable literary strength of his own short works and novels provides ample evidence to support that claim. His earliest published fiction was heavily influenced by H. P. Lovecraft and the Cthulhu Mythos, but he soon developed an impressive range and a distinctive voice, such that *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* now sagely describes him as "Britain's most respected living horror writer." His novels include such classics as *The Face That Must Die*, *Incarnate*, *Ancient Images*, *The Darkest Part of the Woods*, and *Grin of the Dark*, while many of his best short stories can be found in the award-winning collections *Alone with the Horrors*, *Ghosts and Grisly Things*, and *Told by the Dead*. Campbell has also published extensively on horror cinema and edited several anthologies.

"The Change" was written in 1976 and first saw print in draft form in a 1980 issue of the small-press magazine *Shayol*. It was revised and published in final form in the 1982 Fontana collection *Dark Companions*. "I believe I still do regard it as my darkest tale," Campbell notes, "insofar as its theme is how dark the process of writing can become. Fear not—I don't feel that way about writing now!"



AS SOON AS HE REACHED THE FLAT Don started writing. Walking home, he'd shaped the chapter in his mind. What transformations does the werewolf undergo? he wrote. The new streetlamp by the bus-stop snapped alight as the October evening dimmed. Does he literally change into another creature, or is it simply a regression?

"How's it coming?" Margaret asked when she came in.

"Pretty well." It was, though she'd distracted him. He stared out at the bluish lamp and searched for the end of his sentence.

After dinner, during which his mind had been constructing paragraphs, he hurried back to his desk. The bluish light washed out the lines of ink; the rest of the page looked arctically indifferent, far too wide to fill. His prepared paragraphs grew feeble. When he closed the curtains and wrote a little, his sentences seemed dull. Tomorrow was Saturday. He'd begin early.

He had forgotten the queues at the bus-stop. He went unshaven to his desk, but already shoppers were chattering about the crowds they would avoid. They were less than three yards from him, and the glass seemed very thin. He was sure the noise grew worse each week. Still, he could ignore it, use the silences.

Aren't we all still primitive? he wrote. Hasn't civilisation Children whined, tugging at their mothers. Hasn't civilisation Now the women were shaking the children, cuffing them, shouting. Hasn't bloody civilisation A bus bore the queue away, but as many people missed the bus and began complaining loudly, repetitively.

"Yes, it's going all right," he told Margaret, and pretended to turn back to check a reference. He wasn't lying. Just a temporary block.

Hasn't civilisation simply trapped and repressed our

primitive instincts? he managed to stutter at last. But the more strongly Scarved crowds were massing outside, chanting football slogans. There's tribal behaviour for you. But the more strongly Youths stared in at him, shouting inanities. If only there was room in the bedroom for his desk, if only they had erected the bus-stop just a few houses away—He forced himself to keep his head down. But the more strongly primitive instincts are repressed the more savage their occasional outburst will be, whether in mass murder or actual lycanthropy. God, that was enough. Sunday would be better.

Sunday was full of children, playing itinerant games. He abandoned writing, and researched in library books while Margaret wrote her case reports. He was glad he'd taken time off to read the books. Now he had new insights, which would mean a stronger chapter.

Monday was hectic. The most complicated tax assessments were being calculated, now that all the information had arrived. Taxpayers phoned, demanding why they were waiting; the office rang incessantly. "Inland Revenue," Don and his colleagues kept saying. "Inland Revenue." Still, he managed to calculate three labyrinthine assessments.

He felt more confident on the way home. He was already on the third chapter, and his publisher had said that this book should be more commercial than his first. Perhaps it would pay for a house, then Margaret could give up social work and have her baby; perhaps he could even write full time. He strode home, determined to improve the book. Dissolving bars of gold floated in the deep blue sky, beyond the tower blocks.

He was surprised how well the opening chapters read. He substituted phrases here and there. The words grew pale as bluish light invaded his desk-lamp's. When the text gave out, his mind went on. His nib scratched faintly. At the end, of the second paragraph he gazed out, frowning.

The street had the unnatural stillness of a snowscape. Street and houses stretched away in both directions, gleaming faintly blue. The cross-street on his right was lit similarly; the corner house had no shadow. The pavement seemed oppressively close with no garden intervening. Everything looked unreal, glary with lightning.

He was so aware of the silence now that it distracted him. He must get an idea moving before the silence gave way, before someone came to stare. Write, for God's sake write. Repression, regression, lycanthropy. It sounded like a ditty in his mind.

Animal traits of primitive man. Distrust of the unfamiliar produces a savage response. He scribbled, but there seemed to be no continuity; his thoughts were flowing faster than his ink. Someone crossed at the intersection, walking oddly. He glared at the shadowless corner, but it was deserted. At the edge of his vision the figure had looked as odd as the light. He scribbled, crossing out and muttering to deafen himself to the silence. As he wrote the end of a paragraph, a face peered at him, inches from his. Margaret had tiptoed up to smile. He crumpled the book as he slammed it shut, but managed to smile as she came in.

Later he thought an idea was stirring, a paragraph assembling. Margaret began to tell him about her latest case. "Right, yes, all right," he muttered and sat at the window, his back to her. The blank page blotted thought from his mind. The bluish light tainted the page and the desk, like a sour indefinable taste.

The light bothered him. It changed his view of the quiet street which he'd used to enjoy while working. This new staged street was unpleasantly compelling. Passers-by looked discoloured, almost artificial. If he drew the curtains, footsteps conjured up caricatures which strolled across his mind. If he sat at the dining-table he could still hear any footsteps, and was nearer Margaret, the rustling of her case reports, her laughter as she read a book.

His head was beginning to feel like the approach of a storm; he wasn't sure how long it had felt that way. The first sign of violence was almost a relief. It was Thursday night, and he was straining at a constipated paragraph. When someone arrived at the bus-stop, Don forced himself not to look. He gazed at the blot which had gathered at the end of his last word, where he'd rested his pen. The blot had started to look like an obstacle he would never be able to pass. The bluish light appeared to be making it grow, and there was another blot on the edge of his vision—another man at the bus-stop. If looked he would never be able to write, he knew. At last he glanced up, to get it over with, and then he stared. Something was wrong.

They looked almost like two strangers at a bus-stop, their backs to each other. One shrugged his shoulders loosely, as though he was feeling the cold; the other stretched, baring huge calloused hands. Their faces were neutral as masks. All at once Don saw that was just a pretence. Each man was waiting for the other to make a move. They were wary as animals in a cage.

Now he could see how whenever one shifted the other turned towards him, almost imperceptibly. The light had changed their faces into plastic, bluish plastic masks that might at any moment slip awry. Suddenly Don's mouth tasted sour, for he'd realised that the men were turning their backs on the roadway; before they came face to face, they would see him. He was protected by the window, and anyway he could retreat to Margaret. But the sound of her rustling pages seemed very far away. Now the masks were almost facing him, and a roar was growing—the sound of a bus. He managed to gulp back a sigh of relief before Margaret could notice that anything was wrong. How could he explain to her when he didn't understand it himself?

When the men had boarded the bus, making way stiffly for each other, he closed the curtains hastily. His fingers were trembling, and he had to go into the kitchen to splash cold water on his face. Trying to appear nonchalant as he passed Margaret,

he felt as false as the masks in the street.

A face came towards the window, grinning. It was discoloured, shiny, plastic; its eyes shone, unnaturally blue. As it reached the window it cracked like an egg from forehead to chin, and its contents leapt at him, smashing the glass and his dream. Beside him Margaret was sound asleep. He lay in his own dark and wondered what was true about the dream.

The next night he pretended to write, and watched. His suspicion was absurd, but fascinating. As he gazed unblinking at the people by the bus-stop they looked increasingly deformed; their heads were out of proportion, or their faces lopsided; their dangling hands looked swollen and clumsy. Christ, nobody was perfect; the clinical light simply emphasised imperfections, or his eyes were tired. Yet the people looked self-conscious, pretending to be normal. That light would make anyone feel awkward. He would be glad of Saturday and daylight.

He'd forgotten the crowds again. Once they would have set him scribbling his impressions in his notebook; now their mannerisms looked studied and ugly, their behaviour uncivilised. The women were mannequins, in hideous taste: hives of artificially senile hair squatted on their heads, their eyes looked enlarged with blue paint. The men were louder and more brutal, hardly bothering to pretend at all.

Margaret returned, laden with shopping. "I saw your book in the supermarket. I improved their display."

"Good, fine," he snarled, and tried to reconstruct the sentence she had ruined. He was gripping his pen so hard it almost cracked.

On Sunday afternoon he managed a page, as late sunlight turned the street amber. In one case, he wrote, a man interested in transmutation took LSD and "became" a tiger, even to seeing a tiger in the mirror. Doesn't this show how fragile human personality is? Too many bloody rhetorical questions in this book. Very little pressure is needed to break the shell of civilisation, of all that we call human—five minutes more of

that bloody radio upstairs was about all it would take. There was no silence anywhere, except the strained unnerving quiet of the street at night.

Next week Margaret was on call. After being surrounded by the office phones all day, he was even more on edge for the shrilling of the phone. Yet when she was called out he was surprised to find that he felt relieved. The flat was genuinely silent, for the people overhead were out too. Though he was tired from persuading irate callers that they owed tax, he uncapped his pen and sat at the window.

Why is the full moon important to lycanthropy? Does moonlight relate to a racial memory, a primitive fear? Its connotations might stir up the primitive elements of the personality, most violently where they were most repressed, or possibly where they were closest to the surface. Come to think, it must be rather like the light outside his window.

There was his suspicion again, and yet he had no evidence. He'd seen how the light caricatured people, and perhaps its spotlighting made them uneasy. But how could a streetlight make anyone more savage—for example, the gang of youths he could hear approaching loudly? It was absurd. Nevertheless his palms were growing slick with apprehension, and he could hardly keep hold of his pen.

When they came abreast of the window they halted and began to jeer at him, at his pose behind the desk. Teeth gleamed metallically in the discoloured faces, their eyes glittered like glass. For a moment he was helpless with panic, then he realised that the glass protected him. He held that thought steady, though his head was thumping. Let them try to break through, he'd rip their throats out on the glass, drag their faces over the splinters. He sat grinning at the plastic puppets while they jeered and gestured jerkily. At last they dawdled away, shouting threats.

He sat coated with the light, and felt rather sick. He seemed

unable to clear his mind of a jumble of images: glass, flesh, blood, screams. He got up to find a book, any distraction at all, and then he saw his bluish shadow. Its long hands dangled, its distorted head poked forward. As he stooped to peer closer he felt as if it was dragging him down, stretching his hands down to meet its own. All at once he darted to the light-switch. He clawed the curtains shut and left the light burning, then he went into the bedroom and sat for a long time on the bed. He held his face as though it was a mask that was slipping.

On Thursday the bus home was delayed by a car crash. While the other passengers stared at blood and deformed metal, Don was uneasily watching the night seep across the sky. When he reached home the house looked worse than he'd feared: thin, cardboardy, bricks blackened by the light—not much of a refuge at all.

He was overworked, that was why he felt nervous. He must find time to relax. He'd be all right once he was inside with the curtains drawn, away from the dead light that seemed to have soaked into everything, even his fingers as they fumbled with the key. He glanced up to see who was watching him from the upstairs flat, then he looked away hastily. Maybe someone up there was really as deformed as that; he never met the tenants, they had a separate entrance. No, surely the figure must have looked like that because of a flaw in the glass.

In his flat he listened to the footsteps overhead, and couldn't tell if anything was wrong with them. Eventually he cooked the dinner Margaret had left him when she was called away. He tried to write, but the fragility of the silence made him too nervous. When he held his breath, he could hear the jungle of sound beyond the curtains: snarls of cars, the low thunder of planes, shouts, things falling, shrieks of metal, cries. The bluish flat stood empty behind him.

The last singers were spilling out of pubs. Surely Margaret would be home soon. Wasn't that Margaret now? No, the hurrying footsteps were too uneven and too numerous: a man

and a woman. He could hear the man shouting incoherently, almost wordlessly. Now the woman was running, and the man was stumbling heavily after her. When he caught her outside the window she began to scream.

Don squirmed in his chair. She was screaming abuse, not with fear. He could stand it, surely it wouldn't last long, her screeching voice that seemed to be in the room with him, scraping his nerves. All at once a body thumped the window; the frame shook. They were fighting, snarling. Christ! He struggled to his feet and forced himself to reach towards the curtains.

Then he saw the shadows, and barely managed not to cry out himself. Though the curtains blurred them, they were all too clear to him. As they clawed at each other, he was sure their arms were lengthening. Surely their heads were swelling like balloons and changing shape; perhaps that was why they sounded as though they never could have formed words. The window juddered and he flinched back, terrified they might sense him beyond the glass. For a moment he saw their mouths lunging at each other's faces, tearing.

All at once there was silence. Footsteps stumbled away, he couldn't tell whose. It took him a long time to part the curtains, and much longer to open the front door. But the street was deserted, and he might have doubted everything he'd seen but for a smear of blood on the window. He ran for tissues and wiped it away, shuddering. The lamp stood behind him, bright and ruthless; its dead eye gazed from the pane. He was surrounded. He could only take refuge in bed and try to keep his eyes closed.

The next day he rang the Engineering Department (Mechanical & Lighting) from the office, and told them where he lived. "What exactly have you put in those lights?"

The girl was probably just a clerk. "No, they're not mercury vapour," he said. "You might think they were, but not if you had to live with them, I can tell you. Will you connect me with someone who knows?"

Perhaps she felt insulted, or perhaps his tone disturbed her. "Never mind why I want to know. You don't want me to know, do you? Well, I know there's something else in them, let me tell you, and I'll be in touch with someone who can do something about it."

As he slammed the receiver down, he saw that his colleagues were staring at him. What was wrong with them? Had the politeness which the job demanded possessed them completely? Were they scared of a bit of honest rage?

On the way home he wandered until he found a derelict area, though the start of winter time had made him more nervous. Already the sky was black, an hour earlier than yesterday, and he was dismayed to find he dreaded going home. Outside his flat the lamp stood waiting, in a street that looked alien as the moon. Nobody was in sight. He unlocked the front door, then he lifted the brick he was carrying and hurled it at the lamp. As the bulb shattered, he closed the door quickly. He spent the evening pretending to write, and stared out at the dark.

Saturday brought back the crowds. Their faces were pink putty, all too malleable. He cursed himself for wasting last night's dark. If he went to the library for quiet he would have walked two miles for nothing: there would be crowds there too. If only he could afford to move! But it was only the cheap rent here that was allowing him and Margaret to save.

She emerged from the mass of putty faces and dumped shopping on the table. "Isn't it going well?"

"What do you mean, isn't it going well? It won't go better for questions like that, will it? Yes, of course it's going well!" There was no point in telling her the truth; he had enough to bear without her anxiety. That evening he wrote a few paragraphs, but they were cumbersome and clumsy.

On Sunday he tried to relax, but whenever Margaret spoke he felt there was an idea at the edge of his mind, waiting to be glimpsed and written. "Yes, later, later," he muttered, trying vainly to recapture the idea. That night she turned restlessly in

bed for hours. He lay beside her and wondered uneasily what had gone wrong with the dark.

His lack of sleep nagged him on Monday. His skull felt tight and fragile. Whenever he tried to add up a column of figures a telephone rang, his colleagues laughed inanely, a fragment of conversation came into focus. People wandered from desk to desk. His surroundings were constantly restless, distracting.

One of his taxpayers called and refused to believe he owed four hundred pounds. Don sensed how the man's hands were clenching, seeking a victim, reaching for him. There was no need to panic, not with the length of the telephone cable between them. He couldn't be bothered to conceal his feelings. "You owe the money. There's nothing I can do."

"You bastards," the man was screaming, "you f—" as Don put down the receiver.

Some of his colleagues were staring at him. Maybe they could have done better, except that they probably wouldn't even have realised they were threatened. Did they honestly believe that words and printed forms were answers to the violence? Couldn't they see how false it all was? Only his triumph over the streetlamp helped him through the day.

He walked most of the way home, enjoying the darkness where lamps were smashed. As he neared his street the bluish light closed in. It didn't matter, it couldn't reach his home now. When he began to run, anxious to take refuge, his footsteps sounded flat and false as the light. He turned the corner into his street. Outside his flat the lamp was lit.

It craned its bony concrete neck, a tall thin ghost, its face blazing. It had defeated him. However many times he destroyed it, it would return. He locked himself in and grabbed blindly for the light-switch.

After dinner he sat at his desk and read his chapters, in case Margaret suspected he had failed. The words on the bluish pages seemed meaningless; even his handwriting looked unfamiliar. His hot eyes felt unfamiliar too.

And now it was Margaret's noises. They sounded forced, unnervingly artificial, sound effects. When he frowned at her she muted them, which only made them more infuriating. Her eyes were red, but he couldn't help it if she was distressed while he felt as he did, besieged deep in himself. "I'm going to bed," she said eventually, like a rebuke. When he couldn't bear sitting alone any longer, she was still awake. He lay with his back to her in order to discourage conversation, which would distract him. Something was certainly wrong with the dark.

In the morning, when she'd gone to work, he saw what he must do. Since he had no chance of writing at weekends or in the evenings, he must give up his daytime job, which was false anyway. His book was more important, it would say things that needed saying—they would be clear when the time came to write them. In the shaving mirror his grin looked weaker than he felt.

He grinned more widely as he phoned to report himself sick. That falseness was enjoyable. He sat grinning at his desk, waiting for words. But he couldn't reach back to the self who had written the chapters; however deep in his mind he groped, there was nothing but a dialogue. Isn't it going well? No, it isn't going well. No, it isn't, no, it isn't, no, it isn't going well. Repression, regression, lycanthropy. Putty faces bobbed past the window. Now here was the bluish light, moulding them into caricatures or worse. Repression, regression, lycanthropy.

"You're home early," Margaret said. He stared at her, probing for the implication, until she looked away.

After dinner she watched television in the bedroom, with the sound turned to a whisper. He followed her, to place more distance between himself and the tinged curtains. As soon as he switched off the light, the living-room was a dead bluish box. When he clawed at the switch, the bluish tinge seemed to have invaded the light of the room.

"You've left the light on."

"Leave it on!" He couldn't tell her why. He was trapped in himself, and his shell felt brittle. In a way it was a relief to be cut off from her that way; at least he needn't struggle to explain. She stared at the screen, she swallowed aspirin, she glanced at him and flinched from his indifferent gaze. Shrunk figures jerked about as though they were trying to escape the box of the television, and they felt as real as he did. After a while Margaret slipped into bed and hid her face. He supposed she was crying.

He lay beside her. Voices crowded his mind, shouting. Repression, regression, lycanthropy. Margaret's hand crept around his waist, but he couldn't bear to be touched; he shook her off. Perhaps she was asleep. Around him the room was faintly luminous. He gazed at it suspiciously until his eyelids drooped.

When he woke, he seemed hardly to have slept. Perhaps the revelation had woken him, for he knew at last what was wrong with the dark. It had developed a faint bluish tinge. How could the light penetrate the closed door? Was it reaching beneath the door for him? Or had the colour settled on his eyeballs, seeped into them?

It hadn't trapped him yet. He sneaked into his clothes. Margaret was a vague draped huddle, dimly bluish. He tiptoed to the front door and let himself out, then he began to run.

At the tower blocks he slowed. Concrete, honeycombed with curtained rectangles, massed above him. Orange sodium mushrooms glared along the paths, blackening the grass. The light outside his flat was worse than that; it was worse than moonlight, because it infected everyone, not just the few. That was why he'd felt so strange lately. It had been transforming him.

He must go back for Margaret. They must leave now, this minute. Tomorrow they'd find somewhere else to live, draw on their savings; they could come back in daylight for their possessions. He must go back, he'd left her alone with the light. He ran, closing his eyes against the light as far as he could.

As he reached the street he heard someone padding towards him—padding like an animal. He dodged into an alley almost

opposite the flat, but the padding turned aside somewhere. He grinned at the dark; he could outwit the light now that he knew its secret. But as soon as he emerged into the street he sensed that he was being watched.

He saw the face almost at once. It was staring at him between curtains, beside a reflection of the lamp. The face was a luminous dead mask, full of the light. He could see the animal staring out through the eyes. The mask was inside his flat, staring out at him.

He made himself go forward, or perhaps the light was forcing him. Certainly it had won. His head felt cold and hollow, cut off from his trudging. The eyes widened in the mask; the creature was ready to fly at him. The mask writhed, changing.

Suddenly he caught sight of his shadow. The light was urging it towards the window. Its claws were dangling, its head swelled forward eagerly, and this time there was nothing familiar to hold him back, no light he could switch on to change the dead street and the shadow. There was only the enemy in his home. He was the shadow, one hand dangling near the gutter. He snatched up the brick and, smashing the window, struggled in through the splintering frame.

The creature backed away, into a corner. For a moment it seemed to be beaten. But when he leapt, hurling the curtains aside, it fought him with its claws. He struggled with it, breaking it, biting, tearing. At last it was still. He staggered blindly into the bedroom, mopping blood from his eyes with the rags of his sleeve.

He switched on the light, but couldn't tell what colour it was. He felt like a hollow shell. When at last he noticed that the bed was empty, it took him a very long time to force himself to look in the living-room. As he looked, he became less and less sure of what he was seeing. As to who was seeing it, he had no idea at all.



BAY WOLF

Neil Gaiman

Though he had been working as a journalist and comics writer for almost a decade, **Neil Gaiman** first gained widespread attention with the 1989 launch of the startlingly imaginative DC series *The Sandman*. Shortly thereafter came the publication of the novel *Good Omens*, his collaboration with Terry Pratchett, and Gaiman was on his way to becoming a leading voice in speculative fiction. His subsequent novels, including *Stardust*, *American Gods*, and *The Graveyard Book*, have found both popular and critical success, landing atop bestseller lists and garnering a Newbery Medal and a long list of other awards. Gaiman has seen several of his works adapted for the screen, most recently the Academy Award-nominated *Coraline*, and has himself scripted such features as *MirrorMask* and *Beowulf*. He is slated to both script and direct a feature film of his *Sandman*-related mini-series *Death: The High Cost of Living*.

“Bay Wolf” is the second Gaiman story to feature werewolf “adjuster” Larry Talbot and was created for a supernatural detective anthology. (The first Larry Talbot story, “Only the End of the World Again,” was reprinted recently in Stephen Jones’s *The Mammoth Book of Wolf Men*.) As for its inspiration, the author explained it this way in his collection *Smoke and Mirrors*: “It happened that I had just finished co-writing a screen adaptation of *Beowulf*, the old English narrative poem, and was mildly surprised by the number of people who, mishearing me, seemed to think I had just written an episode of *Baywatch*. So I began retelling *Beowulf* as a futuristic episode of *Baywatch* for an anthology of detective stories. It seemed to be the only sensible thing to do.”



*LISTEN, TALBOT. Somebody's killing my people,
said Roth, growling down the phone like the sea in a shell.
Find out who and why and stop them.*

Stop them how? I asked.

*Whatever it takes, he said. But I don't want them walking away
after you stopped them, if you get me.
And I got him. And I was hired.*

Now you listen: this was back in the twenty-twenties
in L.A., down on Venice Beach.
Gar Roth owned the business in that part of the world,
dealt in stims and pumps and steroids,
recreationals, built up quite a following.
All the buff kids, boys in thongs popping pumpers,
girls popping curves and fearmoans and whoremans,
all of them loved Roth. He had the shit.
The force took his payoffs to look the other way;
he owned the beach world, from Laguna Beach north to Malibu,
built a beach hall where the buff and the curvy
hung and sucked and flaunted.

Oh, but that city worshipped the flesh; and theirs was the flesh.
They were partying. Everyone was partying,
dusted, shot up, cranked out,
the music was so loud you could hear it with your bones,
and that was when something took them, quietly,
whatever it was. It cracked their heads. It tore them into offal.
No one heard the screams over the boom of the oldies and the surf.

That was the year of the death metal revival.
 It took maybe a dozen of them away, dragged them into the sea,
 death in the early morning.
 Roth said he thought it was a rival drug cartel,
 posted more guards, had choppers circling, floaters watching
 for when it came back. As it did, again, again.
 But the cameras and the vids showed nothing at all.

They had no idea what it was, but still,
 it ripped them limb from limb and head from neck,
 tore saline bags out from ballooning breasts,
 left steroid-shrunken testes on the beach
 like tiny world-shaped creatures in the sand.
 Roth had been hurt: The beach was not the same,
 and that was when he called me on the phone.

I stepped over several sleeping cuties of all sexes,
 tapped Roth on the shoulder. Before
 I could blink, a dozen big guns
 were pointing at my chest and head,
 so I said, *Hey, I'm not a monster.*
Well, I'm not your monster, anyway.
Not yet.

I gave him my card. *Talbot*, he said.
You're the adjuster I spoke to?
That's right, I told him, tough-talking in the afternoon,
and you got stuff that needs adjusting.
This is the deal, I said.
I take your problem out. You pay and pay and pay.

Roth said, *Sure, like we said. Whatever. Deal.*
Me? I'm thinking it's the Eurisraeli Mafia
or the Chinks. You scared of them?

No, I told him. *Not scared.*

I kind of wished I'd been there in the glory days:
Now Roth's pretty people were getting kind of thin on the ground,
none of them, close up,
as plump and curvy as they'd seemed from farther away.

At dusk the party starts.
I tell Roth that I hated death metal the first time around.
He says I must be older than I look.
They play real loud. The speakers make the seashore pump
and thump.

I strip down then for action and I wait
on four legs in the hollow of a dune.
And days and nights I wait. And wait. And wait.

Where the fuck are you and your people?
asked Roth on the third day. *What the fuck am I paying you for?*
Nothing on the beach last night but some big dog.
But I just smiled. *No sign of the problem so far, whatever it is,*
I said.
And I've been here all the time.
I tell you it's the Israeli Mafia, he said.
I never trusted those Europeans.

Third night comes.
The moon is huge and a chemical red.
Two of them are playing in the surf,
boy and girl play,
the hormones still a little ahead of the drugs. She's giggling,
and the surf crashes slowly.
It would be suicide if the enemy came every night.
But the enemy does not come every night,
so they run through the surf,

splashing, screaming with pleasure. I got sharp ears
(all the better to hear them with) and good eyes
(all the better to see them with)
 and they're so fucking young and happy fucking I could spit.

The hardest thing, for such a one as me:
 the gift of death should go to such as those.
 She screamed first. The red moon was high
 and just a day past full.
 I watched her tumble into the surf, as if
 the water were twenty feet deep, not two,
 as if she were being sucked under. The boy just ran,
 a stream of clear piss splashing from the jut in his speedos,
 stumbling and wailing and away.

It came out of the water slowly, like a man in bad monster
 movie makeup.
 It carried the bronzed girl in its arms. I yawned,
 like big dogs yawn, and licked my flanks.

The creature bit the girl's face off, dropped what was left on
 the sand,
 and I thought: *meat and chemicals, how quickly they
 become meat and chemicals, just one bite and they're
 meat and chemicals . . .*
 Roth's men came down then with fear in their eyes,
 automatic weapons in their hands. It picked them up
 and ripped them open, dropped them on the moonlit sand.

The thing walked stiffly up the beach, white sand adhering
 to its green-gray feet, webbed and clawed.
Top of the world, Ma, it howled.
*What kind of mother, I thought, gives birth to something
 like that?*
 And from high on the beach I could hear Roth screaming, *Talbot,*

Talbot you asshole. Where are you?

I got up and stretched and loped naked down the beach.

Well, hi, I said.

Hey, pooch, he said.

I'm gonna rip your hairy leg off and push it down your throat.

That's no way to say hi, I told him.

I'm Grand Al, he said.

And who are you? Jojo the yapping dog-faced boy?

I'm going to whip and rip and tear you into shit.

Avaunt, foul beast, I said.

He stared at me with eyes that glittered like two crack pipes.

Avaunt? Shit, boy. Who's going to make me?

Me, I quipped. I am.

I'm one of the avaunt guard.

He just looked blank, and hurt, a bit confused, and for a moment I almost felt sorry for him.

And then the moon came out from behind a cloud,
and I began to howl.

His skin was fishskin pale,
his teeth were sharp as sharks',
his fingers were webbed and clawed,
and, growling, he lunged for my throat.

And he said, *What are you?*

He said, *Ow, no, ow.*

He said, *Hey, shit, this isn't fair.*

Then he said nothing at all, not words now,
no more words,

because I had ripped off his arm

and left it,

fingers spastically clutching nothing,

on the beach.

Grand Al ran for the waves, and I loped after him.
The waves were salt: his blood stank.
I could taste it, black in my mouth.

He swam, and I followed, down and down,
and when I felt my lungs bursting,
the world crushing my throat and head and mind and chest,
monsters turning to suffocate me,
we came into the tumbled wreckage of an offshore oil rig,
and that was where Grand Al had gone to die.

This must have been the place that he was spawned,
this rusting rig abandoned in the sea.
He was three-quarters dead when I arrived.
I left him to die: weird fishy food he would have been,
a dish of stray prions. Dangerous meat. But still,
I kicked him in the jaw, stole one sharklike tooth
that I'd knocked loose, to bring me luck.
She came upon me then, all fang and claw.

Why should it be so strange that the beast had a mother?
So many of us have mothers.
Go back fifty years and everyone had a mother.

She wailed for her son, she wailed and keened.
She asked me how I could be so unkind.
She squatted, stroked his face, and then she groaned.
After, we spoke, hunting for common ground.

What we did is no business of yours.
It was no more than you or I have done before,
And whether I loved her or I killed her, her son was dead as
the gulf.

Rolling, pelt to scales,
her neck between my teeth,
my claws raking her back . . .
Lalalalalala. This is the oldest song.

Later I walked out of the surf.
Roth was waiting in the dawn.
I dropped Grand Al's head down upon the beach,
fine white sand clung in clumps to the wet eyes.

This was your problem, I told him.
Yeah, he's dead, I said.
And now? he asked.
Danegeld, I told him.

You think he was working for the Chinks? he asked.
Or the Eurisraeli Mafia? Or who?
He was a neighbor, I said. *Wanted you to keep the noise down.*
You think? he said.
I know, I told him, looking at the head.
Where did he come from? asked Roth.
I pulled my clothes on, tired from the change.
Meat and chemicals, I whispered.

He knew I lied, but wolves are born to lie.
I sat down on the beach to watch the bay,
stared at the sky as dawn turned into day,
and daydreamed of a day when I might die.

On the Web

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Darrell Schweitzer: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darrell_Schweitzer

Gene Wolfe: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gene_Wolfe

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