

INTO
THE
MOUTH
OF THE
WOLF

JOSHUA DAGON



IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO DISTINGUISH
MAN FROM BEAST

UNTIL ONE IS FAMILIAR
WITH BOTH

CHAPTER ONE

“Properly utilized, any kind of bullet will do the job. They’re not particularly susceptible to silver, as we of course learned. However, they can still be very, very tough to bring down. They’re amazingly strong, fast, and they heal extraordinarily quickly.”

- Rehetta Snarl, M.D., Ph.D.
Sr. Research Specialist, Department of Lycanthropology
University of California, San Diego
60 Minutes interview with Morley Safer
Sunday, May 16



It was just the single howl. There was no answer, so don’t panic. It was just that single, lonely howl.

To be perfectly honest, I don’t even know if it was real. Everyone has heard it, of course; it has been on the damn news every day this week. Really, it’s just the same old, tired story: no one has been able to determine the exact source of the howl, just that it originated somewhere within the city itself.

Predictably, rumors have already started to spread that the sound of the creature’s baying was merely a rather artfully composed, electronic reproduction of a Were howl, or—and this is far more likely, if you ask me—it was an amplified recording of the real deal, the result of some pranksters with a set of enormous speakers who were low on creativity and high on free time—as well as high on any number of other possibilities, no doubt.

Still, listening to the sound played over and over again on both the local and national news, even I couldn’t say for certain one way or the other. Even I couldn’t say.

Anyway, that was almost a week ago. No more howls have been heard and no one has been found torn to shreds like some old, clumsy caribou. The country can once again put its collective mind at

ease and go back to happily roasting marshmallows on the beach and letting their kids walk home alone from the bus stop. Folks can go back to their pre-pandemic worldviews, back to barbecuing in their yards and jogging in the parks while relatively unarmed.

Folks *can* do all that. I wouldn't recommend it, but they can.

I won't assume that you've heard of me personally. My name is Russell Shepard. And, yes, if you believe the popular news of the day, then I'm dead. Let me just say here this once that the reports of my passing are entirely fabricated. That, or the account that follows is a spectacular hoax and should at least provide some modest entertainment. So, by all means, read on. Believe what you will about my death. It makes no difference to me.

If it helps, the first time I was described on a local news broadcast, just under three years ago, I was reported to be, "Caucasian, thirty-two years old, approximately five-foot-nine inches tall, one hundred and seventy pounds, with an athletic build. He has very light brown, curly hair, which is cut short. We're told that Mr. Shepard has very distinctive green eyes."

I do, I guess, have distinctive green eyes. And although that initial description still fits me near exactly—with the exception of my age and give or take five or six pounds—there are those times, even now, when not a single physical detail mentioned is remotely accurate.

The broadcast that night included my name right along with my mundane, ordinary, human description. Although, these days, on occasion, I'm still called '*lo anima lupo.*' I'll get to that, though. That's incidental. There's plenty of time. Besides, I'm pretty sure they just mock me with it now, that name. I'm told it's a means by which the faculty here might choose to alleviate tension. It's been explained that I shouldn't take their tone and deportment too seriously. I'm told that I should be forgiving and tolerant. Everyone, they tell me, is still just so flippin' gosh-darn afraid.

They could still be afraid, I suppose. Actually, now that I think about it, maybe they should be afraid. Maybe they should be afraid of the means by which *I* might choose to alleviate tension.

If your sympathy at this point remains somewhat thin—and I don't blame you one little bit if it does—perhaps you might relate to me in just this single way: like the bulk of us, I was only a kid when the world changed. Twenty-whatever years ago, when the outbreak was first documented, I was still a very little boy for whom the world merely consisted of a few suburban neighborhoods and some arbitrary video images. I was only a boy when everything changed and just a

little older when the more appropriate, and consequently affected, population finally found out about it.

Unfortunately, as I approached adulthood, I was also one of the many, many people who weren't willing to face the realities of that change. Oh, the burgeoning global dilemma was damn interesting, don't get me wrong, but when you grow up watching werewolves on the news all of the time, the novelty, not to mention the sense of danger, tends to lose a bit of its potency.

As it was, none of that stuff actually affected my life, not directly anyway. It didn't affect me until roughly three years ago. I might have mentioned that.

My personal world, you see, was changed while I was staying at my late father's cabin, up in the mountains in a tiny community on the shore of Wasser Glas Lake. It was a yuppie wilderness region called Lakeside, a privately preserved, mountain forest area, forty-five minutes drive from the town of Pinchfort, California, which is just over eight hours by car from Palm Springs. Yes, yes, I'm sure that a number of you are quite familiar with Lakeside, California, from all of the recent media coverage, the magazine articles, television documentaries, and so forth and so on. Nevertheless, I'd rather not assume anything in the way of what might or might not be common knowledge. Let me simply tell this story. Let me include everything. It's what's been asked of me, and so I'll do it. I don't have much else to take up my time.

I imagine that, right about now, some of you are saying to yourselves, *'Everything?' He can't possibly mean he's going to include everything.'*

I do, though. I mean, why not? Sure, I'll include everything. What the heck. It's not as though your faith in the truth of this recounting makes much difference at this point. In fact, it's completely possible my lil' record here won't ever make it outside this facility. More than possible, I'd say. Keeping that in mind, I have no reason *not* to include everything. I also have, if you really think about it, no rational reason to lie.

So, I'll tell you all of it. I'll include what the media has so easily dubbed my 'wishfully contrived delusions.' Yeah, I'm the first to admit that it all sounds a bit insane, but yes, I do plan to discuss it. All of it. What are they gonna do? Lock me up?

I'm told that there's interest in the details of my lycanthropic visions, what some of us call 'dream-memories.' It's crazy-ass shit, I know. It might even be seriously psychotic shit, but it's key. At least I

believe it's key, and that's what matters here. You can call it truth, or you can call it wishfully contrived delusion—I won't make any further assertions either way—as long as you keep in mind that I believe it's important to this story.

Frankly, I can't say this is a story that I don't want to tell. No, it should be told, crazy-ass shit and all. It really should be told. Still, please let me tell it my way, the way I remember it, complete with my wishfully contrived delusions, each in their place and with as much detail as I'm able to provide today. In this, I plan to at least attempt to tell the story in a manner that represents the chronological accumulation of information as I experienced it. I won't always succeed, I suppose, but that's hindsight for you.

That's as good a place to begin as any, I'd say, with the idea of hindsight. Growing up, I was always told that hindsight was twenty/twenty, that events were somehow easier to analyze and understand when contemplated after the fact. Maybe to some degree, and in certain circumstances, that might be true. Not in this case, however.

Nearly a third of a century ago, the world changed dramatically and no one's understanding of it has ever been clear. Hindsight can't help anyone understand or analyze the change because, initially, only a very few people were aware of it at all, and none of those people believed it when they saw it. When the contagion finally showed itself, the various leaders of the world simply decided to ignore it. Oh, maybe there was some small, official reaction, some fumbling, cursory effort to manage the outbreak, but it wasn't enough. Actually, 'wasn't enough' is quite a breathtaking understatement. If I may be blunt, the initial effort to manage the outbreak was as effective as using a flyswatter to kill a buffalo.

So, the world changed but no one was told. I guess I do have to sympathize at least a little bit with the various world leaders at the time. The notion of informing the public must have been unthinkable. Who'd want to go on television and announce to the globe that a werewolf had been seen in New York City? Even after the contagion became an accepted news item, it was years before an elected official actually used the word 'werewolf.' 'Lycanthrope' was bravely uttered here and there, but up until about fifteen years ago maybe one out of a thousand people knew what it meant. Maybe.

It was during that time, I believe, during the time it took for the word 'lycanthrope' to gain its status, that the infection really took hold. I suspect that the contaminant itself has been around for a very, very

long time, at least several centuries. It was just waiting, I suppose, for the proper circumstances to really make its mark, to really dig in and do its damage. It waited for a time when it could begin its attack but no one would want to talk about it and the alarm would not be raised. It was waiting for the perfect time to pounce.

The time came. The infection pounced. The various world leaders of the time waved a flyswatter around and hoped for the best. The infection spread in silence and so changed the world.

It changed the world one person at a time.

And that's honestly all I really know about that. Like I said, I was still a child when the infection pounced and the world changed. Over the coming years, though, I'm more than a little embarrassed to admit I didn't think about it much. Yes, the infection changed the world for people one at a time, but I didn't know any of them. And so of course it just went on changing the world, one person at a time, until it eventually got to me.

I didn't think it could happen to me. That's the heart of it. The subject as a whole terrified me and so I never let myself think about it. I never thought it could really happen to me. As an adult, I was even more complacent than the various world leaders. I didn't think that it could happen to me and so now... well, now all I can do is look back and be ashamed.

My shame, however, comes from my pre-infection selfishness regarding those who'd already encountered the contaminant. It was simply too easy to tell myself that someone somewhere must be doing something significant about the problem and therefore my personal, direct compassion, my own informed, hands-on involvement was not necessary. It was too, too comfortable assuming that others more erudite, capable, and more prepared than I were in control and on the ball. There were, I told myself, others far more qualified to worry about the threat; my own worry was superfluous.

Very dangerous perspective, that.

Overall, I'm still of the opinion that my personal world was changed by outside forces, through no real fault of my own. That being said, I can't dismiss a degree of bias.

See, a very funny thing happened when folks were made aware of the fact that werewolves were not only real but were also running around biting people and turning them into werewolves, too. Something very funny indeed happened. People decided that, if a werewolf bit you, then it was your own stupid fault.

Yup. Pretty funny, that. Imagine: a monster bites you and it's

your fault, not the monster's. Hm.

Being who I am, therefore, knowing what I know—or, perhaps more objectively, believing what I believe—I'm only willing to concede fault on a single point: that night three years ago at Lakeside, running out of the cabin and into the woods had been a mistake.

Allowing that blind, childish panic and choosing to flee was a very big, stupid, shortsighted mistake. Admittedly, I should have stayed put, stayed calm, and dialed 9-1-1. Then perhaps I should have tried to get upstairs, to barricade the door and window, and just wait for Emergency Services to arrive. That would likely have been the responsible, mature, enlightened thing to do. I should have done that, but when it all happened it was much too fast. The shock of it alone paralyzed me, and when 'fight or flight' finally won back control, 'flight' was immediately decided, its alternative not having even been considered. Vin Diesel I am not.

Even so, if the same thing happened today, my suspicion is I'd react in an identical manner. Even today. Even now. See, I know very well what's actually out there. It might be surprising to some, but my own status is no protection at all. Like I said, I know what's out there. I know what might be watching. I know what might be lured by the scent of my aftershave or just the sound of my heartbeat.

I admit, not much makes sense anymore, not much at all. As I understand it today, simply deciding to take the trash outside could mean the end of life as you know it. It's ridiculous, even pathetic. Nevertheless, it's true.

Despite recent events, the world is still no closer to any kind of resolution, medically, sociologically, or ideologically. I'm told that day-to-day functioning is as difficult as ever. Sure, science and medicine are telling the world that an answer is—at the most—only five to ten years away. They said exactly the same thing, however, five to ten years ago.

I imagine it's more difficult at night. I suspect going out into the darkness is nearly impossible for most, despite all that's happened, all that's been explained, all that's been promised. They tell me that the fear can be overwhelming even within the midst of numerous trustworthy companions and bathed in a near-daylight, halogen bloom. Even then.

I don't blame a single one. Whether the threat is real or imagined, remote or imminent, I'd be equally cautious, if not downright debilitated. Now I would be, that is. Now, today, knowing what I know, believing what I believe... I would be terrified.

As a matter of fact, were I to comment strictly on the subject of fear, knowing what I know, I would highly recommend it.