

Were oh Were
By Norm Cowie

A hungry tick can't microwave a frozen pizza or run out to the local McDonald's for its dinner.
A bag of Cheese Doodles does it no good.

Instead, a tick quests.

That's what the tick was doing on the blade of grass under the round silver moon. Six hooked legs hugged the grass while a fourth set spread wide to catch whatever animal might brush by. A tick is not a bug, you see. They are in the family Arachnida, which includes spiders and scorpions.

A mournful howl rent the air.

The tick ignored the sound and swayed with the long blade of grass. Its senses were on the alert for the carbon dioxide emissions of a warm blooded animal.

As the sounds of the huge predator crashed nearer through the underbrush, the tick harbored no hopes, no fears, no expectations, no excitement. Its tiny brain was not developed enough for these emotions.

Instead, it waited with mindless patience.

The werewolf rushed by in a typhoon of strength and fury, noise and hot blood, and the tick calmly hooked a ride.

It hung on tight as the werewolf raced furiously through the brush.

The tick ignored the werewolf's anguished rage as it prepared to take its blood meal. It slashed into the hide with a harpoon-like barbed mouth and a sticky secretion seeped into the werewolf's skin. The saliva was a clever mixture of chemicals that induced an anesthetic effect and an

anti-clotting agent. Even more, it hardened like cement, which helped the tick anchor in place.

The tick settled down to gorge as its dinner raced through the darkness.

Its body began to swell deliciously from the werewolf's blood. A tick can increase its size twenty-fold over a several day's feeding.

And there was something wonderful about this blood. It sent sensations through the tick it had never experienced before. Its little mind was benumbed with power and its normal tick-like hunger for blood became more than that.

It was more like ... a lust.

But when the werewolf vaulted through a crevasse between two trees, it scraped its hide harshly against the bark.

The tick was ripped away.

Slightly bloated, it plummeted to the ground. With the adroitness of Batman, it hooked onto a dandelion leaf just before hitting the ground. It hung for just a moment but almost immediately felt the pull of needs not sated by its partial meal.

It scrambled to the end of the leaf and got back into questing mode.

And when the mouse came sniffing by, the were-tick was ready.

Ryan was watching television when he heard the howl.

A wolf?

There hadn't been a wolf sighting here in years.

Ryan was home with just his little sister Carrie. Their parents were playing euchre at a

neighbor's house a mile away, and trusted Ryan to watch his sister for a few hours.

Of course they could trust him. He was a sophomore in high school, after all. Nearly grown. In fact, he would be driving soon, wouldn't he? And not just the farm's tractor. A real car. Maybe something cool like a Grande Prix.

Something banged loudly in the back yard near the stables.

The horses must have been spooked by the wolf.

He waited for a minute, and another howl broke the silence.

Now all of the horses were shuffling nervously.

Ryan knew enough about wolves that they wouldn't come near a homestead, but the horses couldn't know this.

Sighing, he decided he'd better go out and calm them down.

He stood up, and Springer jumped up from his spot near his feet, eager to go wherever his master went.

Ryan peeked into Carrie's room on his way to the door.

"Hey, brat," he said fondly.

"Hey backatcha, jerk." Her eyes never left the computer screen.

Just a normal loving brother and sister.

"I'm just going to go out back and settle the horses down."

"Okay. Have fun." She was surfing anime sites and reading fan-fiction. She could do this for hours.

"C'mon, boy," Ryan said to the Border collie.

Springer's mouth went back into a dog grin, and he bustled in excitement as Ryan dug his feet into his boots. There are a lot of reasons not to walk around a farm barefooted.

He opened the door, and a motion detector floodlight sprung to light.

Springer ran ahead, eager to roust some of the feral cats that kept the mouse population in check.

As he neared the barn door, a cat suddenly sprang out of a window, scabbled furiously, and shot off into the woods as if its tail was on fire, something about the size of a rat hot on its heels. They disappeared into the woods before a surprised Springer could react.

The dog chuffed a confused ‘woof’, his excited eyes on the darkness where they had vanished. He seemed to realize that he wouldn’t have a chance of catching them.

“What the heck was that?” Ryan said, astonished.

Springer gave him a look like, *I have no idea*.

Shrugging, Ryan opened the door.

Inside was warm and musty and filled with the smell of grains, straw and horses. The horses were restless and stomping around in their stalls, eyes wide and nervous.

He went to Tornado first since the big horse already had a nervous disposition. Unhooking the latch, he entered. Tornado watched him warily and backed up a step.

“That’s okay, boy,” Ryan said, holding a hand out.

The big stallion sniffed his hand, shook his head and took another step back.

“What’s up, fellow?” Ryan stroked the velvet nose.

Tornado snorted, but didn’t move away.

Ryan stepped under Tornado’s head and circled an arm around the horse’s neck. He grabbed the mane and gave the big horse a hug. He could feel the strength of the animal and its odor was familiar and pleasant.

Tornado leaned into the embrace.

A shuffling from the next stall made him break the hug. He gave Tornado another friendly whack on the shoulder and went into the next stall to comfort Carrie's small mare Ginger.

Springer was sniffing around for the cats, but there were none in sight. They were probably curled together in the loft, filled with mouse meat.

Ten minutes later, he went back into the yard towards the house. As he climbed the stairs to the deck, he heard a hissing and a squeal of pain from the woods.

What was going on out there?

He opened the door, and took the shotgun from its rack inside the door. It was filled with shot to chase away crows or other destructive critters.

He turned back to the small woods. He had played in the woods his whole life and knew every hiding place, every tree. So he was mostly unconcerned when he went into them.

Springer kept close to his side. Usually he would run ahead, eager to flush out a raccoon or opossum. But for some reason, he seemed hesitant now. His nose twitched as he searched for a scent that seemed to be eluding him.

"What's up, boy?" Ryan asked him, wishing he had grabbed a flashlight. The dog was acting strangely. The full moon's illumination was good enough to light the way for footing, but not enough to chase away shadows.

There was rustling sound from the thicket ahead.

Springer stopped short and whined.

Ryan thumbed the safety's release and peered into the darkness.

There was a spitting sound that turned into a yowling. Then a frantic scrabbling in the leaves.

Springer backed up several steps, his eyes never leaving the thicket.

Then he fled.

“Springer,” Ryan hissed, watching the collie disappear.

He was shocked. Springer was still a young dog, but he’d seen him stand up to a rattlesnake.

There was another sound from the thicket, and Ryan lifted the gun, and started backing away.

There are times you have to trust an animal’s instincts.

The thicket produced another horrible sound that didn’t sound like a cat, and Ryan speeded his pace. He didn’t want to turn his back on whatever was making the sounds. But he watched behind him at the same time, so he wouldn’t trip and accidentally trigger the shotgun.

A low voiced growl pierced the darkness, and Ryan broke into a run.

The house was a hundred yards away, and he covered the distance like an Olympic sprinter, the shotgun cradled in his arms. There was no sign of the dog and the gun banged against the doorway as he stumbled into the kitchen. He quickly locked the door.

He peered back into the clearing and then he saw it.

Something feline stalked out of the shadows. It was roughly the same grey and black color of the barn cat that had run into the woods.

But it wasn’t the cat. This was more like a cat on steroids.

It looked at the house, and its red lined eyes met Ryan’s.

He gasped.

It immediately veered from its path towards the barn and started towards the house, its eyes locked with Ryan’s and its body low like a panther on stalk.

Ryan didn’t know what to do. Was it going to come up to the window? Try and break through? Frantically, he tried to think of every access point to the house. The chimney, the root cellar, the front door, the windows. He didn’t know what this thing was, but who knew, maybe it had opposable thumbs. He left the shotgun leaning against the wall, and ran to the front door,

checking windows on the way.

“What’s going on?” Carrie asked. His frantic activity had sucked her out of the computer, and she was staring at him curiously.

“Help me lock up!” he said urgently.

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have time to explain.” He ran downstairs to check the cellar.

When he came up, she was in the kitchen, looking out the window.

“What’s that?”

He took up his position near the door and picked up the shotgun. “I don’t know. Whatever it is, it scared Springer and it might have gotten one of the cats.”

The animal continued walking without hurry towards the house.

“Ryan. I’m scared.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll be okay,” he assured her with confidence he didn’t feel.

The cat got closer, and Ryan still couldn’t recognize its species. It had the same markings as a cat, but its looked more like a prehistoric saber-toothed cat. But its eyes betrayed a mad intelligence. He shuddered and gripped the gun fiercely. The cat was now just twenty yards away.

Suddenly there was motion, and a black and white object emerged from beneath the porch and streaked towards the barn.

“Springer,” Carrie shouted.

The cat, or whatever it was, acted instantaneously and immediately sprang after the dog.

Ryan flung the door open, and managed a wild shot at the cat. He missed, but he hoped some pellets might find their mark.

“Close the door,” Carrie pleaded.

“But Springer ...”

“I’m scared. Please.”

She was right.

He closed the door, and felt for the shells next to the gun rack. He slid the new round in, and they watched the barn for activity.

They watched for a bit and nothing happened.

But they stayed glued to the window, their breath fogging the pane.

“Is he going to be okay?” Carrie whispered.

“I’m sure. He’s as fast as the wind,” he replied.

She opened her mouth to say something, and then they heard a surprised yipe from beyond the barn. Then a distant growling and whining. Finally, a yelp of fear and pain cut off in mid sound.

“Springer,” Carrie whispered. A tear leaked from her eye.

“There was nothing we could do,” he said defensively.

“We need to call Mom and Dad,” she said.

“Okay. You call. I’ll keep watch here.” He hoped that there weren’t more of the animals on the other side of the house. Maybe they ran in a pack.

He heard her punching numbers on the phone, and he kept vigil from his post.

Finally there was movement. Something black and white.

Springer!

But it wasn’t the collie. It was far too large. Whatever it was that was coming around the barn was several times bigger than the slight dog. As the animal came closer, its actions triggered the motion detector floodlight.

Its markings were exactly the same as Springer's!

The huge pseudo-collie sniffed around the barn. The horses were snuffling and snorting in alarm, hooves pounding onto the ground.

He heard a noise behind him, and he whirled, heart pounding.

"Okay. They're coming," Carrie said. Her eyes were wide and scared.

The dog nosed open the barn door and slipped in. Then the large cat came around the corner, something struggling in its heavy jaws.

The cat ignored the light and sat on its haunches, a big paw holding down the struggling form. It was a rabbit. Then the cat bit the rabbit, ripping a piece from its shoulder. The rabbit screamed in pain and flopped frantically under the cat's unyielding paw.

Then the cat did something horridly curious. It took its big paw off of the rabbit and let it writhe in the dirt.

Ryan and Carrie watched in horror as the rabbit went into a spasm, spinning and biting at itself. The cat watched in interest, but otherwise did nothing to interfere.

Ryan felt as if he couldn't take a breath, as if he were in a dream or alternate reality.

After several moments, the rabbit stopped moving, and lay twitching and panting. The cat still did nothing.

There was an animal scream from the barn of panicked horses amid furious growling and snarling.

"The horses..." Carrie cried. Her hand went to the locked doorknob, but Ryan stopped her from opening it.

"We can't do anything for them," he said.

Now the rabbit's body began to shudder. It seemed to grow before their eyes.

They stared like mice at a rattler.

“Oh, my God,” Carrie breathed.

There were sudden slamming sound from the barn, as if huge bodies were throwing themselves at the walls.

Then the rabbit jerked upright. Its ears were straight up, and twitched in all directions.

Ryan’s gun barrel tapped the window by accident, and the were-rabbit whipped its head towards the house and snarled.

“Oh, jeez. It has fangs,” he whispered hoarsely.

Suddenly the barn doors burst open, splintering from the impact of a monstrous black creature vaguely horse shaped. It snarled, long gleaming incisors glistening in the light. There was a bleeding gash on its flank where the were-dog had bitten. Another similar animal could be seen behind it. Tornado and Ginger.

The were-mouse/rat appeared from the woods, joining the other animals along with another monstrosity ... a were-opossum.

One of the were-horses reared, its angry hooves slicing into the air. Red eyes rolled as it roared its defiance and bloodlust. The other joined in a howling scream.

Carrie answered its scream with one of her own, and all of the were-animals suddenly looked to the boy and girl in the house. They growled in chorus and the were-cat took off towards the house with great athletic bounds. The were-dog that used to be Springer was close on its heels, followed by the were-opossum and were-rabbit.

Ryan thought quickly.

“Upstairs! Now!”

“Why not the cellar?” Carrie cried.

“Not as defensible.”

There was a jolt as something slammed into the door. Glass tinkled as one of the small panes shattered.

“Quick!”

They ran upstairs, and ran into their parent’s room.

They heard the door splinter downstairs as a massive hoof tore it to pieces. Snarling filled the house.

“Get into the closet,” Ryan told Carrie.

“I don’t want to be alone,” she whimpered.

“Don’t worry, they won’t get in here.”

Ryan had chosen their parents room because of their heavy oak furniture. Thankfully, all of the doors in the old farmhouse were also solid oak. He locked the door, and with a grunt pulled the heavy dresser in front of it. He didn’t think the huge were-horses could make it up the stairs, but the rest of the animals would have no problem.

Something bounded up the stairs and immediately started scrabbling and clawing at the door. It was quickly joined by another, and another. Outside the were-horses screamed in anger at being unable to join the fun.

Fortunately, the door seemed to hold.

“What happens when Mom and Dad get here?” Carrie asked from the closet.

He had completely forgotten. They would drive up from the neighbor’s and get slaughtered as soon as they got out of the car. Or worse, turned into were-creatures.

“See if you can get them on the phone!” he shouted. “Tell them not to come up here.”

“That won’t stop them!” she cried.

She was right.

Suddenly, they heard a car pull up the gravel driveway.

“Mom! Dad!” Carrie shouted.

All of a sudden, the pawing and scratching at the door stopped, and they heard the animals galloping back down the stairs.

Ryan quickly ran to the window to yell out to his parents.

He pulled the window open. He could see the car pulling around the house towards the back porch.

He opened his mouth to scream a warning.

And that’s when the were-mosquito struck.