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Opening Extract from...

Mongrels

Written by Stephen Graham Jones

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MONGRELS

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Set in Centaur

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Thea Lucas

1914–1999

thanks, Pop

Eventually I went to America.
There no one believes in werewolves.

—JAMES BLISH

CHAPTER 1

The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress

My grandfather used to tell me he was a werewolf.

He'd rope my aunt Libby and uncle Darren in, try to get them to nod about him twenty years ago, halfway up a windmill, slashing at the rain with his claws. Him dropping down to all fours to race the train on the downhill out of Booneville, and beating it. Him running ahead of a countryside full of Arkansas villagers, a live chicken flapping between his jaws, his eyes wet with the thrill of it all. The moon was always full in his stories, and right behind him like a spotlight.

I could tell it made Libby kind of sick.

Darren, his rangy mouth would thin out in a kind of grin he didn't really want to give, especially when Grandpa would lurch across the living room, acting out how he used to deal with sheep when he got them bunched up against a fence. Sheep are the weakness of all werewolves, he'd say, and then he'd play both parts,

growling like a wolf, his shoulders pulled up high, and turning around to bleat in wide-eyed fear, like a sheep.

Libby would usually leave before Grandpa tore into the flock, the sheep screaming, his mouth open wide and hungry as any wolf, his yellow teeth dull in the firelight.

Darren would just shake his head, work another strawberry wine cooler up from beside his chair.

Me, I was right at the edge of being eight years old, my mom dead since the day I was born, no dad anybody would talk about. Libby had been my mom's twin, once upon a time. She told me not to call her "Mom," but I did, in secret. Her job that fall was sewing fifty-pound bags of seed shut. After work the skin around her eyes would be clean from the goggles she wore but crusted white with sweat. Darren said she looked like a backward raccoon. She'd lift her top lip over her teeth at him in reply, and he'd keep to his side of the kitchen table.

Darren was the male version of my mom and Libby—they'd been triplets, a real litter, according to Grandpa. Darren had just found his way back to Arkansas that year. He was twenty-two, had been gone six magical years. Like Grandpa said happened with all guys in our family, Darren had gone lone wolf at sixteen, had the scars and blurry tattoos to prove it. He wore them like the badges they were. They meant he was a survivor.

I was more interested in the other part.

"Why sixteen?" I asked him, after Grandpa had nodded off in his chair by the hearth.

Because I knew sixteen was two of eight, and I was almost *to* eight, that meant I was nearly halfway to leaving. But I didn't want to have to leave like Darren had. Thinking about it left a hollow feeling in my stomach. All I'd ever known was Grandpa's house.

Darren tipped his bottle back about my question, looked over to

the kitchen to see if Libby was listening, and said, "Right around sixteen, your teeth get too sharp for the teat, little man. Simple as that."

He was talking about how I clung to Libby's leg whenever things got loud. I had to, though. Because of Red. The reason Darren had come in off the road—driving truck mostly—was Libby's true-love ex-husband, Red. Grandpa was too old by then to stand between her and Red, but Darren, he was just the right age, had just the right smile.

The long white scar under his neck, he told me, leaning back to trace his middle finger down its smoothness, that was Red. And the one under his ribs on the left, that cut through his mermaid girlfriend? That had been Red too.

"Some people just aren't fit for human company," Darren said, letting his shirt go, reaching down to two-finger another bottle up by the neck.

"And some people just don't want it," Grandpa growled from his chair, a sharp smile of his own coming up one side of his mouth.

Darren hissed, hadn't known the old man was awake.

He twisted the cap off his wine cooler, snapped it perfectly across the living room, out the slit in the screen door that was always birthing flies and wasps.

"So we're talking scars?" Grandpa said, leaning up from his rocking chair, his good eye glittering.

"I don't want to go around and around the house with you, old man," Darren said. "Not today."

This was what Darren always said anytime Grandpa got wound up, started remembering out loud. But he *would* go around and around the house with Grandpa. Every time, he would.

Me too.

"This is when you're a werewolf," I said for Grandpa.

"Got your listening ears on there, little pup?" he said back, reaching down to pick me up by the nape, rub the side of my face against the white stubble on his jaw. I slithered and laughed.

"Werewolves never need razors," Grandpa said, setting me down. "Tell him why, son."

"Your story," Darren said back.

"It's because," Grandpa said, rubbing at his jaw, "it's because when you change back to like we are now, it's always like you just shaved. Even if you had a full-on mountain-man beard the day before." He made a show of taking in Darren's smooth jawline then, got me to look too. "Babyface. That's what you always call a werewolf who was out getting in six different kinds of trouble the night before. That's how you know what they've been doing. That's how you pick those ones out of a room."

Darren just stared at Grandpa about this.

Grandpa smiled like his point had been made, and I couldn't help it, had to ask: "But—but *you're* a werewolf, right?"

He rasped his fingers on his stubble, said, "Good ear, good ear. Get to be my age, though, wolfing out would be a death sentence now, wouldn't it?"

"Your age," Darren said.

It made Grandpa cut his eyes back to him again. But Darren was the first to look away.

"You want to talk about scars," Grandpa said down to me then, and peeled the left sleeve of his shirt up higher and higher, rolling it until it was strangling his skinny arm. "See it?" he said, turning his arm over.

I stood, leaned over to look.

"Touch it," he said.

I did. It was a smooth, pale little divot of skin as big around as the tip of my finger.

"You got shot?" I said, with my whole body.

Darren tried to hide his laugh but shook his head no, rolled his hand for Grandpa to go on.

"Your uncle's too hardheaded to remember," Grandpa said, to *me*. "Your aunt, though, she knows."

And my mom, I said inside, like always. Whatever went for Libby when she'd been a girl, it went for my mom.

It was how I kept her alive.

"It's not a bullet hole," Grandpa said, working the sleeve of his shirt down. "A bullet in the front leg's like a bee sting to a real werewolf. This, this was worse."

"Worse?" I said.

"Lyme disease?" Darren said.

Grandpa didn't even look across the room for this. "Diseases can't touch you when you're wolfed out either," he said down to me. "Your blood, it's too hot for the flu, the measles, smallpox, cancer."

"Lead poisoning?" Darren asked, in a leading-him-on voice.

"When you change back, the wolf squeezes all that lead back out," Grandpa said, no humor to it anymore. "Unless it's in the bone. Then it kind of works around it, like a pearl."

Darren shrugged a truce, settled back to listen.

"What, then?" I said, because somebody had to.

"A *tick,*" Grandpa said, pinching his fingers out to show how small a tick is. How little it should matter.

"A tick?" I said.

"A tick," Darren said.

"It probably came from this fat doe I'd pulled down the night before," Grandpa said. "That tick jumped ship, went to where the beating heart was."

"And then when he shifted back," Libby said, standing all at

once by the kitchen table, my faded blue backpack in her hand so she could drop me off at school on her way to work, "when he shifted back, when the *werewolf* hair went back into his skin to wrap around his bones or wherever it goes, it pulled the tick in with it, right?"

"You do remember," Grandpa said, leaning back.

"Like trying to climb a flagpole that's sinking," Darren said, probably reciting the story from last time Grandpa had told it. He did his bored hands up and up the idea of a flagpole to show, the bottle cocked in his fingers not even spilling.

"The word for it is 'impacted,'" Libby said right to me. "It's when something's most of the way into the skin. A splinter, a tooth in your mouth—"

"A tick," Grandpa cut in. "And I couldn't reach it. That was the thing. I couldn't even *see* it. And your grandma, she knew that the fat ones like that are full of babies. She said if she grabbed it with the needle-noses, popped it, the babies would all go in my blood, and then they'd be like watermelon seeds in my stomach."

"That's not how it works," Libby said to me.

"So you went to the doctor," Darren said over her. "In town."

"Doc, he heated up the end of a coat hanger with his lighter," Grandpa said to me, trying to be the one to tell the story right, "and he—" He acted it out, stabbing the burning-hot bent-out coat hanger down and working it around like stirring a tiny cauldron. "Why there's a scar there now, it's that I wouldn't let him dress it, or stitch it. You know why, don't you?"

I looked from Libby to Darren.

They each directed me back to Grandpa. It was his story, after all.

"Because you've got to be born to the blood to take it," Grandpa said, his voice nearly at a whisper. "If that doctor had got even

one drop into a cuticle, he'd have turned into a moondog, sure as shooting."

My heart was thumping. This was better than any bullet hole.

Libby was making lifting motions with her hand for me to get up already, that she was going to be late, she was going to get fired again.

I stood from this dream, still watching Grandpa.

"Let him finish," Darren said to Libby.

"We don't have—"

"If you're bit, or if you get the blood in you," Grandpa said anyway, "then it burns you up fast, little pup, and it *hurts*. All you can do is feel sorry. Those ones, they just have these wolf heads, a man body. They never understand what's happening to them, just run around slobbering and biting, trying to escape their own skin, sometimes even chewing their own hands and feet off to stop them hurting."

He wasn't looking at me anymore, but out the window. The eye I could see on my side, it was his cloudy one.

I think it was the one he was looking with.

Neither Libby nor Darren said anything, but Libby did accidentally look out the window, like just for a peek. Just to be sure.

Then she set her mouth into a grim line, pulled her face back to the living room.

I was going to be late for school and it didn't matter.

"Come on," she said, taking my hand, and on the way past Grandpa I brushed my hand on the sleeve of his shirt, like to tell him it was okay, I think. That it was a good story. That I'd liked it. That he could keep telling me these stories forever, if he wanted. I would always listen. I would always believe.

He flinched away from my hand, looked around for where he was.

"Here, old man," Darren said, handing a strawberry wine cooler across to him, and I climbed into my side of Libby's El Camino, the one she had from finally breaking up with Red, and halfway to school I started crying, and I couldn't figure out why.

Libby switched hands on the wheel, pulled me over to her.

"Don't think about it," she said. "I don't even know how he really got that scar. It was before we were all born."

"Because Grandma was there," I said.

Just like my mom, Grandma had died the day she gave birth. It was like a curse in our family.

"Because Grandma was there," Libby said. "Next time he tells that stupid story, the tick won't even be on the back of his arm anymore. It'll have been that old cut up on his eyebrow, and the doctor heated his pocketknife up, not a coat hanger. One time when he told it to us it was that one scar that pulls beside his mouth."

This is the way werewolf stories go.

Never any proof. Just a story that keeps changing, like it's twisting back on itself, biting its own stomach to chew the poison out.

The next week we found Grandpa out in the pasture without any clothes. His knees were bloody, not scabbing over yet, and the heels of his hands were scraped raw, and his fingertips were chewed by the gravel and the thorns. He was staring at us but he wasn't seeing us, even with his good eye.

Darren and me got to him first. I was riding on Darren's back. He was running everywhere at once, and there were tears coming back on the side of his face.

He let me down slow when we saw Grandpa.

"He's not dead," I said, to make it true.

It worked.

Grandpa's back lifted and fell with his next wheezy breath.

Darren took two steps away and slung his bottle out as hard as he could, the pale pink liquid tracing drippy circles for the first few feet, then nothing. Just a smell on the air like medicine.

"How old you think he is?" Darren said to me.

I looked up to him, down to Grandpa.

"Fifty-five," Darren said. "This is what happens."

Libby heard his bottle break into whatever it broke into, and traced it back to us. She ran over, her hands in a steeple over her mouth.

"He thinks he's shifted," Darren told her, disgusted.

"Help me!" Libby said, falling to her knees by her dad, trying to get his head into her lap, her long black hair shrouded over both of them.

That was one day.

I quit going to school for that week, and promised myself to keep Grandpa alive.

The way I did it was with stories. By keeping him talking.

"Tell me about Grandma," I said one night after Darren had left, after Red had come and stood at the gate like a statue until Libby drifted out to him. She couldn't help it.

I was asking about Grandma because if he thought he was really shifting into a werewolf, then talking to him about it wasn't going to make him any better.

" 'Grandma,' " he said in his new halfway slur, then shook his head no, said, "she never ever got to be called 'Momma,' did she?"

I wanted to take my question back. To start over.

Grandpa breathed a deep important breath in, then out. He said, "You know werewolves, they mate for life, right? Like swans and gophers."

He pretty much only sat in his chair now. Used to when he smiled one side of his mouth, it meant something good was coming. Now it meant something bad had happened, Libby said.

"Gophers?" I said.

"You can smell it on them," he said, snuffling his nose to show.

I'd never seen a gopher. Just the mounds.

"Grandma," Grandpa said then, clearer. "You know when she first figured me out, what I was, she thought it meant I was married to the moon, like. That that was the only time I would go out howling."

I narrowed my eyes and he caught it, added, "That's not how it works, little pup. Too short a leash. We'd starve like that. Anyway. I was married to *her*, wasn't I?"

A log in the fire popped sparks up the chimney. Darren called it an old-man fire. It was September.

"Another thing about werewolves," Grandpa said at last. "We age like dogs. You should know that too."

"Like dogs," I repeated.

"You can burn up your whole life early if you're not careful. If you spend too much time out in the trees, running your dinner down."

I nodded. As long as he was talking, he wasn't dead.

"Grandma," I said again, because that's where we'd been, before the werewolves.

Grandpa swallowed a lump, coughed it back up and spit it in his hand, rubbed it into the blanket on his lap.

"There used to be a secret," he said. "A way for them, for the wives, for them not to . . ."

Not to die, I knew. Since Grandpa'd started living mostly in the living room, he'd decided to solve the family curse. It was what all the stolen library books by the couch were for. So he could find the old way for a human woman to live with a werewolf and not die from giving birth.

His research was the big reason Libby stayed mostly in the kitchen. She said nothing he did was going to bring her mom back, was it? There wasn't any big werewolf secret. Grandma had just died, end of story.

Darren thought Grandpa's books were funny. They were all strange stories, amazing facts.

"We buried her in the church graveyard," Grandpa said then, on some different part of the Grandma-story running in his head. "And they—they dug her up, little pup. They dug her up and they—they—"

Instead of finishing, he lurched forward so I had to push back to keep him from spilling out of his chair. I didn't know if I could get him back into it.

By the time he looked up, he'd forgot what he'd been saying.

He'd told it to me before, though, when Libby wasn't around to stop him.

It was another werewolf story.

After Grandma had died giving birth, a rival pack had dug her up as a message to him. It was about territory.

Grandpa had taken the message back to them on the end of a shovel, and then used that shovel on them.

This had all been *his* territory back then, he usually said, to end that story out. His territory as far as he could see, as much as he could fight for. Some days he'd claim all of Arkansas as his, even, ever since the war had spit him up here.

But I wasn't stupid. I wasn't at school that month, but I was

still learning. Libby had finally told me that the scar on Grandpa's arm, it was probably from a cigarette he'd rolled over on once. Or an old chickenpox. Or a piece of slag melting into his sleeve, burning down into his skin.

What I had to do to get to the truth of the story was build it up again from the same facts, but with different muscle.

Grandma had died and been buried. I knew that. Even Libby said it.

Probably what had happened—no, what *had* to have happened, the worst that *could* have happened—was that some town dogs had got into the cemetery the night after the funeral, when the dirt was still soft. And then Grandpa had gone after that pack with his rifle, or his truck, even if it had taken all month. And then used his shovel to bury them.

I preferred the werewolf version.

In that one, there's Grandpa as a young man, a werewolf in his prime. But he's also a grieving husband, a new and terrified father. And now he's ducking out the doorway of the house this other pack dens up at. And his arms, they're red and steaming up to the shoulders, with revenge.

If Libby grew up hearing that story, if he told it to her before she was old enough to see through it to the truth, then all she would remember would be the hero. This tall, violent, bloody man, his chest rising and falling, his eyes casting around for the next thing to tear into.

Ten years later, of course she falls for Red.

Everything makes sense if you look at it long enough.

Except Darren showing up at the house two or three hours later. He was naked, was breathing hard, covered in sweat, his eyes wild, leaves and sticks in his hair, one shoulder raw.

Slung over his shoulder was a black trash bag.

"Always use a black bag," he said to me, walking in, dropping the bag hard onto the table.

"Because white shows up at night," I said back to him, like the three other times he'd already come back naked and dirty.

He scruffed my hair, walked deeper into the house, for pants.

I peeled up the mouth of the bag, looked in.

It was all loose cash and strawberry wine coolers.

The last story Grandpa told me, it was about the dent in his shin.

Libby leaned back from the kitchen sink when she heard him starting in on it.

She was holding a big raw steak from the store to her face. It was because of Red, because of last night.

When she'd come in to get ready for work, she'd seen Darren's trash bag on the table, hauled it up without even looking inside. She strode right back to Darren's old bedroom. He was asleep on top of the covers, in his pants.

She threw the bag down onto him hard enough that two of the wine-cooler bottles broke, spilled down onto his back.

He came up spinning and spitting, his mouth open, teeth bared.

And then he saw his sister's face. Her eye.

"I'm going to fucking kill him this time," he said, stepping off the bed, his hands opening and closing where they hung by his legs, but Libby was already there, pushing him hard in the chest, her feet set.

When the screaming and the throwing things started, one of them slammed the door shut so I wouldn't have to see.

In the living room, Grandpa was coughing.

I went to him, propped him back up in his chair, and, because