

It had to be a gag, because nobody has a name like Boris Swearoff. And a werewolf too? Like man that's too much!

THE BEATNIK WEREWOLF

by Dan Lindsay

IT WAS DRIZZLING, AS USUAL, and I turned my coat collar up as I stood there under the street light. California, the land of sunshine! For the tenth time I pulled out the note and re-read it.

Dear Sir Lane:

Would you be interested in helping a fellow creature with a big problem? It won't cost you any money. I have read your stories in the trade magazines for years and you seem to be the one to help me. Please come to Marie's at eight o'clock on Tuesday evening. Take the back booth. I will make myself known.

Boris Swearoff

Across the street was Marie's. It was Tuesday and ten minutes until eight. I stood there, feeling like a prize patsy, wondering which one of my drunken friends had framed such an elaborate gag. It had to be a gag because nobody has a name like Boris

Swearoff, and I don't write for the trade magazines—I write science fiction and fantasy. Ah, well, I told myself, maybe this screwball business would take my mind off my troubles for a while—Elaine, my regular playmate, had given me the boot a few weeks ago and I'd been feeling low ever since.

I crossed the street and pushed open the door. The smoke-filled cave was packed with a real weird group. Either a masquerade party, I decided, or a beatnik hang-out. I stood there at the door, waiting for my eyes to adjust. The poorly lit street seemed like high noon compared to this. There were a few lights on the back bar, for the rest it was strictly stub candles in wax-coated beer bottles. I headed for the back booth feeling foolish and out of place.

A lean, bearded character, with a lupine face was already sitting there. I hesitated, then started to turn away.

"Like man are you Lane?" A

slightly guttural voice stopped me in mid-stride. It was the lupine appearing gentleman in the booth.

"I am . . ."

"Then drape the frame. I am Swearoff."

I sat, feeling more foolish by the second. He smiled and I felt the hair on the back of my neck stiffen. If ever I saw a "Ho Ho Ho, now I have you in my power" leer, this was it.

"You . . . uh . . . mentioned something about reading my stories in the trade magazines. You must have the wrong Lane. I write fantasy and science fiction."

He gave me a steady stare and shook his head. "Man it's you I want."

"I just never thought of them as trade magazines."

"Like man you would if you were a werewolf. Say, would you like a drink?"

"Double Bourbon . . . water back."

I watched him go to the bar. The bartender knew him and that made me feel better. I have a deep faith in the basic humanity of bartenders; if he was known by the bartender, then I wasn't going to be eaten after all. I relaxed a little and stared at the group around me. If beatnik means mangy, then they were beatnik. Most of them could have used a shave, a haircut, a toothbrush, and most of all, a bath. I had just re-convinced myself that it was all a big gag when

he came back. Werewolf, did he say?

"My problem is simple." He slid me my bourbon and sat down. "I'm making it with this chick, see? She wouldn't dig this werewolf bit, at all. Man she'd blow! After two hundred years I'm beat. I want to retire like anybody else . . . maybe have cubs . . . you know. It's square, but I'm playing it by ear."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't. It was his turn to be embarrassed. He took a sip of his beer, wiped his beard, and stared down at the table top.

"Like man I've lost my taste for blood."

"Why bring this real simple problem of yours to me?" I knew I was going to wake up in my own cozy bed in a minute anyway, so I went along.

"It's your fault I'm here. All the conversation about California and open collars—makes it easier for a werewolf to get to the jugular. I was happy in Europe, but I kept thinking about that rich American blood and the crazy spread of national flavors. It got to me, and now this chick has ruined me. Like you're a big man on Lycanthropy so I make it you can help."

"Look, Swearoff, or whatever the hell your real name is, I'm going. I'm getting up and walking out. I can go along with a gag as well as the next guy—but a beatnik werewolf?"

"Look man this is no caper. I got two real problems here. This chick has got me way out. I'm tired of this werewolf racket. I'm really beat. It's too much but I want to be a real square john."

I got up shaking my head. I wasn't going to wait for my drunken friends to come howling through the door.

"Look man—" his dog-like eyes pleaded with me—"I don't like to metamorphose in a public place, but I will, a little. Sit back and watch my hands."

I don't know why, but I did. His hands were just hands. Lean, like the rest of him, but just hands. I was ready to laugh when they started trembling. Then the fingers started shortening. The nails were growing longer. Thick black hair started coming out. I stared down at my empty glass. What had he put in my drink? I batted my eyes, and looked at his hands again. They weren't hands at all. They were paws, powerful hairy wolf paws!

"Convinced?" Sweat was pouring from his face as he stared at me. I shook my head. I still couldn't believe my eyes.

"Then look at my ears."

Like the hands, before. His ears were just ears. Gradually they cupped, started growing longer.

"Man, this hurts." He was trembling violently now. "Do I have to grow my tail before you'll believe me?"

"I believe! Turn it off!" I was ready to scream.

Suddenly he let his breath out in one loud swoosh. The ears became just ears and the hands went back to just hands. He pulled out a handkerchief and mopped the sweat off his face.

"It's holding back that's hard," he explained. "A complete metamorphosis comes natural. It took me a hundred and fifty years to learn control."

For a while I didn't say anything. He seemed to understand. At least he got me another double bourbon and waited while I drank it. It might as well have been water.

"Gets you the first time you see it, doesn't it?" His smile was wry and bitter.

I nodded my head and looked away. "What do you expect from me?"

"I want to shake the habit." He watched me out of eyes that suddenly looked two hundred years old. "Just a hint of this werewolf bit and this chick would shove, man . . . but fast. I couldn't take that. In two hundred years it never happened before. She's a real kick."

"I know. My girl wanted an older man. I wish I knew what to tell you, but I don't. Why don't you talk to a priest?"

He shook his head. "Would you go to *your* bogeyman for help? Besides, it isn't my soul. A werewolf

is a physical thing. You saw. Waving a cross around just bugs us because of the commotion. I've had crosses waved at me since I was fifteen years old—the only nervous-making ones are those big enough to use as a weapon. It doesn't take a silver bullet to jar me, and I can't vanish in a puff of smoke. That's for squares."

"What do the other werewolves say?"

"I've never known another werewolf. My mother and father were as far in as yours are. It's a lonesome kick, and that's why this chick hits me so hard—I'm not lonely with her. Like it really sends me after two hundred years of being alone."

"Two weeks is bad enough, but can't you just control yourself? Sort of . . . er . . . switch to food?"

"I did that a long time ago. Vitamins help. It's my genes I'm worried about, man. What would it do to my chick if we came up with a wolf pack? See what I mean? Too much!"

"You can't!" The answer was suddenly so clear to me that I wondered why I hadn't seen it before. "You have no problem. Just take the chick and your vitamins and forget about the rest."

Swearoff stiffened in his seat.

"Keep talking, man."

"According to you, werewolves are a biological sport, not hybrids, not a race of creatures. Biological

sports can't breed true to their sportdom. If you can reproduce yourself at all—the offspring will be completely human. The big danger is that you won't be able to reproduce at all."

"Uh . . ." He looked off across the room. A deep red blush flooded his bearded face. "No sweat, there. That was my other problem."

"Oh . . ." I shoved my cigars in my pocket and stood up.

"Thanks . . ." Swearoff's eyes were so grateful it hurt me to look. "If there is ever anybody you want . . . damn! I've got to quit that! Anyway, thanks!"

I looked back over my shoulder as I got to the door. He was shoveling a large handful of vitamins into his mouth. The door exploded against the side of my face. I shook my head to clear away the bells. There stood Elaine.

"Babydoll! How I've missed you." I reached for her.

"Oh, hello, Harry . . ." She backed away, anxiously looking around the room. "Nice to see you."

"Look, let's get a drink and talk this thing out."

"Harry, it's over. I'm going to get married to the sweetest guy in the world. . . . Oh, there he is!"

I closed my eyes, afraid to look as she rushed past me.

Yep, Boris. Regular wolves maybe I can compete with, but not werewolves! I stumbled out into the night.