

Shift

I'm still not sure why I started writing this, as I'm sure recent events will be chronicled by those far more articulate than me. But I feel I have to, as I'm scared this is likely to end up being my obituary, or worse—that of my species.

It all started a little over a year ago now, when a poor quality time-lapse video of what claimed to be a 'werewolf' changing from human to animal appeared on a few of the less mainstream conspiracy theory websites. Over the years, there had been numerous others all making the same laughable claim that werewolves really exist.

However, this one happened to be the real deal, by that I mean it wasn't some back bedroom produced CGI werewolf transformation, but instead showed a wolf shapeshifter transforming from human to his animal form in order to heal some pretty horrific injuries.

Sickeningly, it appeared from the all too clearly broken arm and leg and numerous other injuries he sported, that the guy had been deliberately beaten to within an inch of his life. Most likely by the two heavy-set men holding baseball bats and wearing skull patterned balaclavas and combat fatigues that stood behind him half obscured by the shadowy background. Either that, or the poor bastard had been chased, and run down by a vehicle. Irrespective of whatever had caused the injuries, they had without doubt been inflicted in some sick attempt to demonstrate a shapeshifter's ability to repair and heal their injuries during a shift.

However, it was plain to see the guy was so far gone with the pain, or he had been drugged, or more likely both, that he had no idea where he was, what he was doing, or even that he was being videoed. In normal circumstances, no shifter would ever change forms if there was even the slightest chance of it being witnessed by anyone other than another shifter, or a human close to him like a partner who knew what he was.

The transformation from one form to the other isn't some magical, snap of the fingers miracle like you see in the movies, it takes time, usually a good two hours or so, and a lot longer still if there are significant injuries. The accelerated metamorphosis process leaves the shifter totally vulnerable for that time, unable to even detect an attack let alone do anything about it. Think caterpillar turning into a moth but without the armored protection of a chrysalis, scale it up, and you're starting to get the idea. I heard someone once describe the intermediate form as a man-sized haggis, which I guess is a pretty good analogy. This is the reason wolf shifters rely on the protection of the pack when changing, and feline

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shifters either hide themselves away or put their faith in the safety of a small, select group.

The disturbing content of the video had the shifter community jittery for a good while. Although photos, 8mm movies, and later videos had surfaced from time to time over the years, nothing as worrying as this example had ever been seen before. But, after the initial shock passed, most shifters stuck their heads in the sand in the belief that adopting a 'least said, soonest forgotten' mentality would insulate them from the reality of the incident.

This just left the aluminum foil hat mob to get excited over it. Besides, after a few weeks, a video interview with some teenage girl from Nebraska claiming she'd been made pregnant during an alien abduction became the new center of attention for conspiracy theorists. As everyone forgot about the 'werewolf', the status quo in the shifter communities soon re-established itself, all the ostriches pulled their heads out of the sand or their butts, and everything was declared to be fine once more.

However, out of the blue, a shorter version of the shifter video resurfaced and started to feature on a couple of small internet news sites. This time no one got majorly het up over it, and even though its re-emergence was unusual, everyone fully expected a few more of these little news sites to feature it before interest in it evaporated, and some other wild story become the flavor of the month.

Although the shifter community has always been pretty fragmented, it contains plenty of hackers and video effects guys who on the very rare occasions when faced with a real shifter video becoming public band together and make a vampire interview or alien autopsy video that give the impression of being filmed in the same location as the shifter one. The idea obviously being to discredit the original video, and it has always worked—up till now, that is.

Then towards the end of March one of the major television networks, either CNN or Fox News, I can't remember which one now, showed a clip from the transformation scene in the video at the end of their late evening news program with the headline 'Monsters in our midst?' and followed it with a short interview with some so-called 'expert' proclaiming it to be factual.

Within 24 hours the shit storm started...

Other TV stations not wanting to get caught hanging behind in viewer ratings also began showing excerpts of the original footage and bringing in their own 'experts'. Within days, it became one of the most viewed videos on YouTube in a good while. Now people in the shifter community understandably began to get very anxious.

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Then as bad luck would have it, a young family with a couple of kids on vacation in a Montana national park, managed to get themselves savaged to death in what was quite clearly an attack by one or more grizzly bears. Two days later, a group of heavily armed vigilantes from some self-styled local militia produced photos of the body of a large, emaciated and somewhat elderly gray wolf they claimed was the ‘werewolf’ that had killed the family. Being held upright between two of the hunters made the corpse look huge and gave the intended effect of it being bipedal. Plus, the blood still dripping from its gaping mouth completed the monster look.

As close up shots of a supposed werewolf corpse make for better viewer ratings than another bear attack, the television stations and followed the next day by the papers went with the wolf story. With the cold callousness so often shown towards victims by the media, the unfortunate parents were all but forgotten, however, numerous photos of the little boy and girl, no doubt bought from family and friends, were shown—repeatedly.

Overnight, groups and individuals sporting all manner of weapons from hunting rifles, through handguns to crossbows, declared open season on the wolf population of the United States. Despite appeals from the police, wildlife agencies and even the Vice President not to do it, hunters set out all over America with the sole aim of ridding the country of ‘werewolves’. Social media started to sink under a tidal wave of selfies and too many dead ‘werewolf’ photos.

At this point, a good majority of lone wolf shapeshifters like a lot of feline shifters simply stopped shifting altogether. Others, refusing to bow to pressure or maybe just being all macho/pigheaded/dumb (delete as appropriate) took themselves off to private land owned by wolf packs in the middle of nowhere to shift. Contrary to Hollywood inspired popular belief, shapeshifters do not change into some half man, half beast abomination every full moon. We change as and when we want, and we have just two distinct forms, pure human and pure animal.

In our animal form, we don’t go around attacking small towns and settlements, massacring the inhabitants. Sure, we hunt and eat the odd mule deer and the like, that’s what apex predators do. And without any doubt, it is us and not Homo sapiens who are the world’s number one predator on dry land.

In human form, we work in stores, offices, factories, construction sites, everywhere and doing everything. We watch football and go to ball games. We get drunk in bars with our unsuspecting human buddies, although our faster metabolism means we take longer to get drunk and sober up much quicker after. We marry and have kids. However, the father’s shifter genetic code is passed on to only their male offspring, this lays dormant until they reach their late teens or

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early twenties. As a young shifter's DNA starts to transmute from human to shapeshifter they become immune to the vast majority of human illnesses including diabetes, some coronary conditions, and all sexually transmitted infections, handy that eh? Basically, most of the things that could put us in hospital or require medical investigation with the risk of our abnormal body chemistry being discovered. Although we still get colds and flu. I know, go figure. Oh, we don't get distemper in our animal form, although living in the wild for too long does bring with it the risk of fleas.

Of course, we can be killed; we are just as susceptible to things like falls from heights, fatal gunshot wounds, or major trauma from car or motorcycle wrecks as any human. Plus, if we are too weak from injury, or from blood loss to shift we cannot repair ourselves and we will die, no exceptions. We may be super-human, or super-animal, whichever you like, but we're not immortal.

Anyway, that's enough of the history and biology lessons.

In the first six months after the hunting frenzy started, the only casualties of the whole 'werewolf' debacle had been a sizeable number of completely innocent grey wolves, and seventeen 'hunters' accidentally killed by their own hand, or by their trigger-happy buddies. The tally I believe was something like; twelve shot dead, two crushed by motor vehicles, two killed falling from a height, and one managing to decapitate himself after tripping and falling head first into one of the illegal bear traps he'd been setting. Now... ain't karma a bitch?

If things had carried on in this way, everything would have settled down after a few more months. But once again fate took an unfortunate turn when Louisiana state law enforcement arrested a guy called Alex Bartlett for shooting dead his next-door neighbor in the trailer park where they both lived. After an armed standoff lasting several hours, police and state troopers eventually fired tear gas canisters through Bartlett's trailer windows and captured him.

However, a host of TV news crews had already descended upon the scene like vultures. Witnesses clamoring to get their five minutes of fame in front of the cameras claimed that before shooting the guy, Bartlett had been going around the park claiming his neighbor was actually a werewolf and been attacking and eating people including children. As the gas-masked police dragged Bartlett still high on methamphetamine, kicking and screaming out of his trailer home, he managed to repeat his claims straight into the lenses of the waiting cameras.

Desperate to avoid panic setting in amongst the brain dead, the authorities, sought to publicly dismiss Bartlett's claims as those of someone with a number of

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mental health issues caused through years of drug and alcohol abuse. But despite their best efforts, a media frenzy ensued. However, the TV stations, all desperate to outdo the competition in the ratings war, showed the original 'werewolf' video cut with scenes from Bartlett's arrest and having returned en masse to the trailer park videoed more interviews with Bartlett's concerned neighbors. All keen to tell better stories than their neighbors to the waiting cameras, they started telling about the strange way the murdered man had behaved, and the howls and strange noises that came from his trailer during full moons. And the cameras just kept recording it all.

The Bartlett incident became the catalyst for people to realize that the so-called werewolves had a human form too, and could easily be their neighbor, a work colleague, bowling buddy or even a family member having been 'turned' by the bite of a werewolf.

Rumors, misinformation, and speculation took on the ferocity of an out of control wildfire, sweeping across the country, especially in rural areas. Anyone living alone became a suspect, as did anyone who didn't fit in with the public's perceived idea of 'normal'. This included large numbers of people with learning difficulties or mental health issues. Anyone who happened to be of Eastern European descent were regarded as prime suspects as it was a God-given fact that werewolves came originally from Eastern Europe. Apparently, all the movies had more than a grain of truth in them.

Sales and downloads of werewolf movies went through the roof and determined to make as much hay as possible while the sun shone, the movie companies became mercenary in their promotion of any movie with a werewolf in it somewhere. Television stations started showing evenings of back to back werewolf and vampire movies.

Towns and communities set up neighborhood patrols as the police refused to waste their time chasing 'figments of people's dumb imaginations'. Parents started to keep their kids indoors of an evening, national parks emptied of visitors, except for the gun-toting hunting parties still only concerned with decimating the wolf population, and more of their own ranks. And to the delight of gun store owners everywhere the sale of handguns, assault rifles, and hunting rifles shot up, with demand outstripping supply in many states.

Everyone in law enforcement realized it would only be a matter of time before some poor innocent individual would be gunned down because they were not 'normal'. Their worst fears didn't take long to turn into reality.

The first victims were two Idaho teenagers from the 'furry' community who had gone out dressed in their custom-made fursuits. Their coming across a bunch

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of armed vigilantes ended badly with both kids dying from multiple gunshot wounds. The episode resulted in the police making an impassioned plea for people not to wear animal costumes or any form of mask in public—especially at night.

Little more than a week later in New York State, police found the body of a first-generation immigrant from eastern Europe, shot dead and with a wooden stake driven through his heart. Over the following weeks and months, a number of other deaths were thought to be related to the werewolf panic epidemic, but without direct proof, nothing could be proven.

In September, the nightmare development that every shifter had been praying wouldn't happen, did.

The first shifter wolf pack had been discovered...

The above is an edited extract from the short story Shift by Sean Catt.

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www.seancatt.com

books@roughimage.co.uk