

WEREWOLF PROJECT

Treatment by Neal Marshall Stevens

We start hovering over the streets of the lower east side, looking down from a height. We hear the voice of JOHN RUSSELL. "You ever hear that saying, whenever one door closes, another door opens. Don't take too much comfort in it..."

We then meet the protagonist, John Russell, at a benefit for the homeless on the upper east side. He's sort of the "star" of the event because his company is planning to endow a fund to help the homeless. We also meet his attractive wife, his affable partner, BEN MOSS. Later, they go home to their recently purchased co-op on the upper east side, where we meet their pretty daughter.

Let's face it. This guy seems to have everything. Then the next day comes. It turns out that his partner has disappeared. And so have all of the company assets. The bank accounts are empty. The pension fund is empty. The money that was supposed to endow the homeless is gone.

What follows are a series of nightmarish meetings in a progression of rooms of diminishing size. The company goes bankrupt. They lose the co-op and have to move into a little apartment. But they're maxed out on their credit and can't keep up the payments. He tries to find a new job, but "the market is tight". Next thing you know, he's in another room. This time his wife is divorcing him. All he wants is to be able to see his little girl. But, with no money, he can't even keep the little apartment he's in. His wife moves upstate, taking their girl with her, and the court order, guaranteeing visitation isn't worth anything – because he has no more money to pay a lawyer to pursue the matter.

He's evicted from his apartment and has to abandon most of his remaining possessions. He ends up sleeping in the park, where he's picked up for vagrancy. In jail, he gets shunted to ELLY WARDEN, a black social worker in her thirties. At first, the meeting doesn't go well. He clearly has kept the expectations of his past life. She has no patience with somebody who's "too good" to work at McDonald's. She's used to dealing with people who've never had anything, including a chance. "Welcome to the real world," she says.

She starts going over the soul-killing procedures for applying for welfare – for being sucked into the massive bureaucracy of poverty. Unfortunately, it grinds at its own rate, and he won't have any money for a few weeks. In the meantime, she arranges for him to go to an emergency shelter. She gives him her card.

The shelter is something out of Dante's Inferno. While he sleeps fitfully, his few remaining possessions are ripped off by some little kid. When he confronts the kid it turns into a major stink and he's thrown out of the shelter, now with nothing more than what's in his pockets – an empty wallet containing some canceled credit cards and the useless court order guaranteeing visitation to a child who's now a thousand miles away.

He ends up sleeping in a doorway in an alley somewhere, but his sleep is disrupted by the sounds of a pursuit. He wakes to see a teen-aged girl, MAGGIE, apparently terrified, being pursued by a young THUG. With more chivalry than brains, he tries to interfere and gets himself beaten unconscious for his trouble. But when the attacker turns his attention back toward the girl, she no longer seems afraid. In fact, this is actually an ambush and we see Maggie transform into a werewolf. In a matter of seconds, the attacker is dispatched. What about John?

But instead of killing him, Maggie, apparently taken by John's Quixotic attempt to save her, flips him over and takes a nasty bite out of his shoulder blade. He rouses in time to see her fleeing, in her wolfish form, carrying the body of the Thug, up the side of the building and out of sight.

Later, in the emergency room, he meets with Elly Warden again. They've called her because he's been talking about seeing wolves climbing up the sides of buildings. The strange thing is – the mark on his back. It wasn't caused by a wolf, of course, but may have been inflicted by a dog. The E.R. Doctors are worried about rabies. That's the trouble with these homeless people – he's going to need a series of shots, and they tend to disappear once they leave the hospital. Maybe she can talk to him... And, of course, he doesn't have any of the necessary paperwork...

She goes to see him. He's trying, unsuccessfully, to sleep in the waiting room. She tries to talk to him, but it's clear that he's on his last legs, as if whatever was left of the old John Russell has been emptied out. She tries talking to him, but he seems obsessed with how terrible everything smells – it seems as if he can smell people down the hall... She's worried about him, tells him to come see her the next day. He doesn't argue. She gives him some money to get something to eat.

He wanders off to the park and goes to sleep on a park bench. Soon the night comes on and the park has become a distinctly more isolated and dangerous place. He wakes to find a pair of thugs literally going through his pockets. When he struggles, they knock him to the ground. He's reached the end of his rope. When they threaten him, he says, in a paroxysm of rage, "Kill me."

Abruptly, as his rage grows, he undergoes a terrifying transformation, literally becoming a werewolf. He pursues the two and slaughters them with terrifying speed and ferocity.

Then he turns – and finds himself looking at Maggie, in her human form. "Now that you've killed them, don't waste them," she says. He turns – and finds that others of the pack, in their werewolf forms, are dropping down out of the trees.

Taking the bodies of the murdered men – clearly for food – they lead John up to the roofs and back to their lair – a cinderblocked building on the lower east side, only enterable from the roof.

During the next day, while the rest of the pack sleeps, Maggie briefs John on life in the pack. They sleep by day, hunt and feed by night. They don't grow old, don't get sick, but they can die if somebody inflicts enough damage on one (though generally, only another werewolf is able to inflict that much damage). The pack has its territory. Other packs have their own. He must learn the smells of the others, of his own pack, and avoid entering other territories without permission – and to defend their territory against intruders from other packs. Of course, there's a pecking order in the pack as well – and he's at the bottom. In fact, she really shouldn't have inducted him. Generally that doesn't happen unless ISAAC gives permission.

Isaac, whom John meets the next night, is the pack's Alpha male. As the others point out, he isn't the biggest. He isn't even the strongest. He's the Alpha simply because he's the most aggressive. He's been the boss of the pack for longer than anybody can remember. In fact, he's been a werewolf so long that he never turns back to human. Some think that he's forgotten how. But if he's forgotten how to become human, he's lost none of his human intelligence. Clearly, he isn't happy that the pack has gotten a new member – a nobody who brings nothing to them. He tells him that the rules are really quite simple. If he endangers the pack, Isaac will tear his head off. If he challenges another member of the pack and loses, then they'll do whatever they want to him – probably tear his head off. Other than that – he can do pretty much whatever he wants. Becoming a wolf isn't simply taking on the form of the wolf, or the strength of the wolf. What it really means is taking on the conscience of the wolf. A wolf kills with joy, without mercy, without regret. He asks no forgiveness and gives none. That's the conscience of the wolf – that's the freedom of the wolf. If John accepts it, he'll find that he has a kind of power that human beings can scarcely dream of. If he rejects it, he'll make himself miserable and Isaac will probably end up tearing his head off.

John, of course, doesn't know quite what to make of this sudden change in life style, and clearly isn't all that enthusiastic about participating in hunts where the prey, clearly, is human. As in nature, the wolves hunt the "strays" of the human herd – the sick, the young, the old, the poor, the disenfranchised. Really, it's a service to the community. Nobody else wants them. The wolves need a good meal. It's a perfect symbiosis.

John is of two minds at first and Maggie has a heart to heart with him – and almost tears his head off in the process. Doesn't he understand what an opportunity this is? He can do anything he ever wanted. He may have to follow the rules in the pack, but as far as the sheep are concerned – whatever he wants, he can have. Well, strike that. He can't, for instance, get his wife and kid back. But anything that tooth and claw can get him, he can get.

For awhile, though, there really isn't anything that John wants that "tooth and claw" can get him. That is, until he detects a familiar odor in a passing car – and almost kills himself chasing it down the B.Q.E. in the middle of the night.

He's detected the scent of his old partner, Ben Moss, who, apparently, has come back to New York. He may have changed his identity, but he can't change his scent. With the encouragement of Maggie and the pack (and the cooperation of the upper-east side pack), he manages to track down his partner in a new penthouse.

Face to face with his ex-partner in human form, Moss at first tries to buy his way to freedom. He offers to return the money. John can get back everything he's lost. He's tempted at first, but under Maggie's prodding, his rage begins to take over. As he starts to change, he warns Moss to stand still – not to run. But panicked, Moss can't stand still. He runs, and instinct takes over. John pursues him, in wolf form, and kills him.

At first, John, literally finds himself falling into the will of the pack, taking joy in his new found strength and power – and in the conscienceless joy of the "hunt." But he is shocked back to his human conscience when one of his fellow wolves refers to a "meal" he's sharing as "lamb" – a child. What he thought of, at first, as an awakening, he now recognizes as a kind of deadly drug. Sickened, he flees from the pack.

At first, he wants to simply live by himself, hunting rats down in the subway. But Maggie tracks him down and tells him that it doesn't work that way. No loose cannons in the pack. Either he comes back or he's dead. John wonders why she's keeping herself "up wind" in the subway tunnel. The answer is clear. The others are waiting, listening – and clearly they've heard enough. They come tearing out of the darkness after John.

There follows a nightmarish pursuit, dodging in and out amongst the subway tracks. In the end, John manages to escape, but only because Maggie turns a blind eye and let's him get to a sewer inlet, where his scent is lost to the pursuers.

Now he moves cautiously through the streets, invisible to the human population because he's now, both in appearance and in odor, a bum. He walks with plastic bags over his feet and hands, and nobody comments. Bums do things like that. Of course, he's actually doing it to disguise his scent while he tracks Elly. Finally, he finds her apartment. He waits in the alley outside until night comes, and then he transforms. Still covering his hands and feet, he climbs up the outside of the building, comes in through the window, and waits for her in the dark. When she shows up, of course, she's surprised – even though John has resumed his human form.

But her initial surprise becomes something else when he asks her what she knows about the pack. She's heard of it, in fact, about the killers, the fact that the people "up above" know about them, let them be, whether out of fear or something else. But she doesn't believe it – people always talk, but it's just stories. People are always disappearing. With some people, like John, it seems to come naturally. He tells her that he's seen the pack. They're real. Of course, she thinks he's crazy. That is, until he calmly transforms into a werewolf directly in front of her. He warns her not to run, but frankly, she's too scared to do much of anything.

"Welcome to the real world," he tells her. John wants to do something – to reveal this ancient secret to the world – to destroy the pack. Clearly, their power requires secrecy. All he has to do is show people what he can do and there would be no way to deny it, no way to hide it. He could destroy not only the Pack, but all the packs.

She is terrified, but willing. What can she do? He tells her that there're going to be state hearings on the homeless in a week. She's going to be there, as a witness. He wouldn't be able to get in as he is, but she can bring him in -- as a "sample" of the homeless. It'll be a great photo opportunity -- a greater photo opportunity than anybody ever dreamed of.

He departs, but warns her to be careful. Both his life and hers are now in terrible danger.

He goes back into hiding in the sewers uptown, where they can't track him down.

But he hasn't been careful enough. They manage to track his human scent to Elly's apartment -- where they smell both his "wolf scent" and her "fear" smell. They may not know what he's planning, but they know that she's seen him -- and she isn't dead.

So they find Elly and kidnap her. Isaac marks the wall of her apartment with his blood -- an official challenge. To save Elly, he has to face Isaac and defeat him, something which Isaac isn't remotely worried about -- because the only way to defeat him, in essence, is to BECOME him, something which he believes that Russell is incapable of doing.

Following Isaac's scent, John pursues him, and Elly, into a hellish underworld beneath the lower east side.

The battle ensues, with the Social Worker's life at stake. Isaac beats John into the ground, humiliates him, strips him naked. When he finds his wallet -- that John's still clung to for some reason, he finds the court order for visitation. Maybe Isaac will pay them a visit. He hasn't been upstate in a while. John scrambles to fight back, but Isaac knocks him down again.

He's about to finish him off, when Maggie intervenes to save him, and Isaac brutally kills her. John, apparently defeated, tries to retreat -- something that no self-respecting werewolf would ever do. Isaac, now confident that he's won, advances on John, ready to finish him. But the retreat was actually a trap. As Isaac advances, he steps on a loose piece of grillwork. John lifts his foot -- and the section gives way, dropping Isaac down onto the subway beneath -- and directly into the path of an oncoming train.

When the train has passed, the pack descends -- and finds Isaac, dragged and torn. Not dead, but dying.

And dying, Isaac reverts, at last, to his human form -- the form of a thirteen-year old boy -- for werewolves don't age. John advances on the terrified boy as the others shout for him to finish him. But he can't. Stricken, he holds the boy as he dies.

Elly is freed, but John has come to realize that the salvation he was after isn't attainable. He belongs neither to the world of the day, nor of the night. The wallet he's clung to, the court order -- it's a fantasy. He throws them away, and then he sends Elly away.

The other members of the pack don't know what to do. Who's their leader now? He points to Isaac's fallen form. That's their leader. They can follow him to where he's gone, if they want, or do whatever they want with him. He can't be hurt any more. And neither can John.

We end where we started, above the streets of the Lower East Side. We find John, in his werewolf guise, watching Elly through the window of her apartment. We hear him in voice over, "Did you ever hear that old saying? When one door closes, another door opens? I found out it works the other way too. When one door opens, another door closes. I guess the real point is, you can't spend your life worrying about doors. You just have to keep going."

He moves off, across the rooftops, into the night.