

Red Lick

They say this place has always been called Red Lick, even before there was any town. I don't know if it was named for the river or the dirt, or maybe both, but the deer and the wild animals would always come here and lick the salt from the ground when they needed it.

That meant there was always game to be had, and my grandfather Joram would ride here from his farm down the way, because the hunting was good.

It was the summer of 1863 when he first saw the beast, and he didn't know at first what it was. It was nigh on to evening, and the dark was falling fast. Joram had seen nothing to shoot all day, and he was starting to think it might be best to head home before the night came.

Then he saw a doe standing at the edge of the pine woods, and he stopped to see what she would do. If he could get that deer, it would be well worth riding home in the dark.

The doe raised her ears and stood stock still to listen and smell of the wind, but she was no more still than Joram. He waited patiently until she was satisfied all was safe, and slowly walked into the clearing. She nibbled the dry grass before taking another look around, and then she started to lick the ground where a patch of red clay showed through.

There was a bright full moon at the edge of the sky, and Joram slowly and carefully raised his rifle. The deer was too intent on the salt lick to see him under the shadows of the trees, and he began to hope he had a chance.

Then the beast came. It leapt suddenly out of the darkness of the pine thickets, and fell snarling on the deer before she or Joram had a chance to see it coming. The doe gave a bleat of terror before the beast had her, and that was all.

Joram's heart was beating fast, for the thing was too big for a wolf and not shaped like a mountain lion or anything else he knew. He wanted no part of it, whatever it was, and he began to back slowly away from the scene in hopes it wouldn't notice him.

The moment he moved, the thing stopped eating and raised its head. It cocked one ear to the side, and then looked straight at Joram and gave a low growl.

Now Joram was a brave man, but the vicious beast terrified him, and he forgot everything he knew about the ways of wild animals, and he turned and ran.

The beast didn't follow him. Not that night, and Joram counted himself blessed not to have been killed beside the deer at the salt lick.

Yet he began to notice that all was not well after that day. Cattle and goats disappeared without explanation, and when the moon shone bright in the sky, he often saw large shapes stalking the edges of his pastures at night.

Joram's terror was immense, but he swore to himself to follow the things and make an end, no matter what the danger might be. For if he didn't stop losing his cattle, then his family would starve come winter.

Therefore Joram waited for another night when the moon was full, and the beasts who stalked his land and killed his livestock came again. As always, they slipped away to the east just before sunrise. But this time Joram mounted his steadiest horse and followed behind them.

The things didn't move too fast, and when they crossed the clearing by Cowhorn Creek, he caught a glimpse of two of them walking side by side.

The red lip of the sun came up at that very moment, and before Joram's eyes, both beasts were changed instantly into the forms of men, who went on walking eastward toward the rising sun.

The men walked several miles into the rough hill country that lay in that direction, until they came to the tallest hill Joram had yet seen. He saw a thin trail of wood smoke rising from the top of the hill, and watched the two men head directly toward that place. He followed until he saw them disappear inside a house near the summit.

Joram hid himself in a deep thicket to watch, and by and by several more people came out of the woods and entered the house as well. He waited until no more came, and to make certain no one left the house.

The hilltop was flattened, and cleared of trees all around the house. Part of it was fenced, although Joram saw no animals or crops nearby. It was a bad place for farming, to be sure, for the dirt was too rocky and thin to grow much. Indeed there was a large flat stone thrust up from the ground right in front of the house, and smaller outcrops in several other places. It puzzled him why anyone would choose to live in such a poor place, but he decided perhaps the people were hunters or trappers who traded for food. He marked well where the hill and the cabin lay, and then returned to his own home.

Joram went secretly to the hilltop several times to spy on the people who lived there and to find out what he could about who they were. He began to notice that the cabin was usually empty, except near the times when the moon was full, and that the beast-men never stirred from their sleep till late afternoon.

So it was that he crept to the edge of the hilltop one morning in October, and hid himself inside the goat barn. It was to be the full moon that night, and he wished to see what happened when these men became beasts.

That night was not to be like other nights, though. When the moon rose, he watched through a crack in the barn wall while ten people gathered silently around the flat stone in the center of the clearing. They looked like ordinary people to Joram, and they did nothing but stand there in a circle.

Before long, a young man was led out of the house by an older man, and these two walked to the flat stone. It was a cold night, but the young man removed his shirt and lay down on his back on the stone.

Joram feared he was about to see the young man's death, but instead the older man held up a bowl high above his head, and then painted some of whatever it contained on the young man's chest with his thumb. Then he offered him a drink from a flask he held in his pocket, and the liquid it contained was so dark and thick that it might well have been blood.

When all this was done, the men and women in the circle looked up at the moon and howled, and before Joram's eyes they changed into the hideous beasts that had haunted his farm all that summer and fall.

The man with the bowl laughed, and then he changed form as well. Then all of them ran away into the woods.

Joram stood frozen with horror and fear in the goat barn, not daring to leave the place because of the beasts in the woods.

Now Joram had seen enough. He was a righteous man, and he fell to his knees and begged God to save him from the beasts, and to destroy this horrible place where so much evil had been done.

Then Joram fell senseless to the floor, and he was given a dream of what he must do. When he woke, he found a spring of cold water nearby. Then Joram blessed that water and gathered some of it in his canteen before sprinkling it everywhere on the hilltop, and especially on the flat stone. The young man lay fast asleep on the stone, and the water didn't wake him. Then Joram prayed for that place to be clean again, and before his eyes the flat stone turned from gray to brown.

Then he set fire to the cabin and the barn, and fled from that place for the last time.

No beast ever came to trouble Joram or his family ever again, and no sight was ever seen of them in any of the lands nearby.

Joram never returned to the hilltop, but it may be that the blessing holds true on that place, such that no evil thing dare go near it.

All these things were told me by my grandfather, many years ago, and he always spoke the truth.