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# **The Last Werewolf**

Written by Glen Duncan

Published by Canongate Books

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# THE LAST WEREWOLF

Glen Duncan



CANONGATE

*Edinburgh • London • New York • Melbourne*

Published by Canongate Books in 2011

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First published in Great Britain in 2011 by  
Canongate Books Ltd, 14 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1TE

[www.meetatthegate.com](http://www.meetatthegate.com)

Excerpt from *The Essentials of Psycho-analysis* by Sigmund Freud, published by the Hogarth Press,  
reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Ltd

Excerpt from 'Aubade' by William Empson TKT  
Excerpt from 'The Discovery of the Pacific' by Thom Gunn TKT

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*  
A catalogue record for this book is available on  
request from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 84767 944 4  
Export ISBN 978 1 84767 945 1

Typeset in Perpetua by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,  
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A big howl of appreciation to: Jonny Geller, Jane Gelfman, Melissa Pimentel, Nick Marston, Jamie Byng, Francis Bickmore, Marty Asher and all at Canongate and Knopf; to Stephen Coates for musical genius and free psychotherapy; and to Kim Teasdale, without whom none of it would be any fun at all.

FIRST MOON

LET IT COME  
DOWN

# 1

‘It’s official,’ Harley said. ‘They killed the Berliner two nights ago. You’re the last.’ Then after a pause: ‘I’m sorry.’

Yesterday evening this was. We were in the upstairs library of his Earl’s Court house, him standing at a tense tilt between stone hearth and oxblood couch, me in the window seat with a tumbler of forty-five-year-old Macallan and a Camel Filter, staring out at dark London’s fast-falling snow. The room smelled of tangerines and leather and the fire’s pine logs. Forty-eight hours on I was still sluggish from the Curse. Wolf drains from the wrists and shoulders last. In spite of what I’d just heard I thought: Madeline can give me a massage later, warm jasmine oil and the long-nailed magnolia hands I don’t love and never will.

‘What are you going to do?’ Harley said.

I sipped, swallowed, glimpsed the peat bog plashing white legs of the kilted clan Macallan as the whisky kindled in my chest. *It’s official. You’re the last. I’m sorry.* I’d known what he was going to tell me. Now that he had, what? Vague ontological vertigo. Kubrik’s astronaut with the severed umbilicus spinning away all alone into infinity ... At a certain point one’s imagination refused. The phrase was: *It doesn’t bear thinking about.* Manifestly it didn’t.

‘Marlowe?’

‘This room’s dead to you,’ I said. ‘But there are bibliophiles the world over it would reduce to tears of joy.’ No exaggeration. Harley’s collection’s worth a million-six, books he doesn’t go to any more because he’s entered the phase of having given up reading. If he lives another ten years he’ll enter the next phase – of having gone back to it. Giving up reading seems the height of maturity at first. Like all such heights a false summit. It’s a human thing. I’ve seen it countless times. Two hundred years, you see everything countless times.

‘I can’t imagine what this is like for you,’ he said.

‘Neither can I.’

‘We need to plan.’

I didn’t reply. Instead let the silence fill with the alternative to planning. Harley lit a Gauloise and topped us up with an unsteady hand, lilac-veined and liver-spotted these days. At seventy he maintains longish thinning grey hair and a plump nicotined moustache that looks waxed but isn’t. There was a time when his young men called him Buffalo Bill. Now his young men know Buffalo Bill only as the serial killer from *The Silence of the Lambs*. During periods of psychic weakness he leans on a bone-handled cane, though he’s been told by his doctor it’s ruining his spine.

‘The Berliner,’ I said. ‘Grainer killed him?’

‘Not Grainer. His Californian protégé, Ellis.’

‘Grainer’s saving himself for the main event. He’ll come after me alone.’

Harley sat down on the couch and stared at the floor. I know what scares him: If I die first there’ll be no salving surreality between him and his conscience. Jake Marlowe is a monster, fact. Kills and devours people, fact. Which makes him, Harley, an accessory after the fact, fact. With me alive, walking and talking and doing the lunar shuffle once a month he can live in

it as in a decadent dream. *Did I mention my best friend's a werewolf, by the way?* Dead, I'll force a brutal awakening. *I helped Marlowe get away with murder.* He'll probably kill himself or go once and for all mad. One of his upper left incisors is full gold, a dental anachronism that suggests semi-craziness anyway.

'Next full moon,' he said. 'The rest of the Hunt's been ordered to stand down. It's Grainer's party. You know what he's like.'

Indeed. Eric Grainer is the Hunt's Big Dick. All upper-echelon members of WOCOP (World Organisation for the Control of Occult Phenomena) are loaded or bankrolled by the loaded for their expertise. Grainer's expertise is tracking and killing my kind. *My kind.* Of which, thanks to WOCOP's assassins and a century of no new howling kids on the block, it turns out I'm the last. I thought of the Berliner, whose name (God being dead, irony still rollickingly alive) was Wolfgang, pictured his last moments: the frost reeling under him, his moonlit muzzle and sweating pelt, the split-second in which his eyes merged disbelief and fear and horror and sadness and relief – then the white and final light of silver.

'What are you going to do?' Harley repeated.

*All wolf and no gang.* Humour darkens. I looked out of the window. The snow was coming down with the implacability of an Old Testament plague. In Earl's Court Road pedestrians tottered and slid and in the cold swirling angelic freshness felt their childhoods still there and the shock like a snapped stem of not being children any more. Two nights ago I'd eaten a forty-three-year-old hedge fund specialist. I've been in a phase of taking the ones no one wants. My last phase, apparently.

'Nothing,' I said.

'You'll have to get out of London.'

'What for?'

'We're not going to have this conversation.'



‘It’s time.’

‘It’s not time.’

‘Harley—’

‘You’ve got a duty to live, same as the rest of us.’

‘Hardly the same as the rest of you.’

‘Nevertheless. You go on living. And don’t give me any poetic bollocks about being tired. It’s bogus. It’s bad script.’

‘It’s not bad script,’ I said. ‘I am tired.’

‘Been around too long, worn out by history, too full of content, emptily replete – you’ve told me. I don’t believe you. And in any case you don’t give up. You love life because life’s all there is. There’s no God and that’s His only Commandment. Give me your word.’

I was thinking, as the honest part of me had been from the moment Harley had given me the news, *You’ll have to tell it now. The untellable tale. You wondered how long a postponement you’d get. Turns out you got a hundred and sixty-seven years. Quite a while to keep a girl waiting.*

‘Give me your word, Jake.’

‘Give you my word what?’

‘Give me your word you’re not going to sit there like a cabbage till Grainer tracks you down and kills you.’

When I’d imagined this moment I’d imagined clean relief. Now the moment had arrived there was relief, but it wasn’t clean. The sordid little flame of selfhood shimmied in protest. Not that my self’s what it used to be. These days it deserves a sad smile, as might a twinge of vestigial lust in an old man’s balls. ‘Shot him, did they?’ I asked. ‘Herr Wolfgang?’

Harley took a fretful drag, then while exhaling through his nostrils mashed the Gauloise in a standing obsidian ashtray. ‘They didn’t shoot him,’ he said. ‘Ellis cut his head off.’

## 2

All paradigm shifts answer the amoral craving for novelty. Obama's election victory did it. So did the Auschwitz footage in its day. Good and evil are irrelevant. Show us the world's not the way we thought it was and a part of us rejoices. Nothing's exempt. One's own death-sentence elicits a mad little hallelujah, and mine's egregiously overdue. For ten, twenty, thirty years now I've been dragging myself through the motions. How long do werewolves live? Madeline asked recently. According to WOCOP around four hundred years. I don't know *how*. Naturally one sets oneself challenges – Sanskrit, Kant, advanced calculus, t'ai chi – but that only addresses the problem of Time. The bigger problem, of Being, just keeps getting bigger. (Vampires, not surprisingly, have an on-off love affair with catatonia.) One by one I've exhausted the modes: hedonism, asceticism, spontaneity, reflection, everything from miserable Socrates to the happy pig. My mechanism's worn out. I don't have what it takes. I still have feelings but I'm sick of having them. Which is another feeling I'm sick of having. I just ... I just don't want any more *life*.

Harley crashed from anxiety to morbidity to melancholy but I remained dreamy and light, part voluntary obtuseness, part Zenlike acceptance, part simply an inability to concentrate. You can't just ignore this, he kept saying. You can't just fucking *roll*

over. For a while I responded mildly with things like, Why not? and, Of course I can, but he got so worked-up – the bone-handled cane came back into play – I feared for his heart and changed tack. Just let me digest, I told him. Just let me think. Just let me, in fact, get laid, as I've arranged to do, as I'm paying for even as we speak. This was true (Madeline waited at a £360-a-night boutique hotel across town) but it wasn't a happy shift of topic for Harley: prostate surgery three months ago left his libido in a sulk and London's rent boys bereft of munificent patronage. However, it got me out of there. Tearily drunk, he embraced me and insisted I borrow a woollen hat and made me promise to call him in twenty-four hours, whereafter, he kept repeating, all this pathetic sissyng cod Hamlet bollocks would have to stop.

It was still snowing when I stepped out into the street. Vehicular traffic was poignantly stupefied and Earl's Court Underground was closed. For a moment I stood adjusting to the air's fierce innocence. I hadn't known the Berliner, but what was he if not kin? He'd had a near miss in the Black Forest two years ago, fled to the States and gone off-radar in Alaska. If he'd stayed in the wilderness he might still be alive. (The thought, 'wilderness', stirred the ghost animal, ran cold fingers through the pelt that wasn't there; mountains like black glass and slivers of snow and the blood-hot howl on ice-flavoured air ... ). But home pulls. It draws you back to tell you you don't belong. They got Wolfgang twenty miles from Berlin. *Ellis cut his head off*. The death of a loved one brutally vivifies everything: clouds, street corners, faces, TV ads. You bear it because others share the grief. Species death leaves no others. You're alone among all the eerily renewed particulars.

Tongue out to taste the cold falling flakes I got the first inklings of the weight the world might put on me for the time I had left,

the mass of its detail, its relentless plotless insistence. Again, it didn't bear thinking about. This would be my torture: All that didn't bear thinking about would devote itself to forcing me to bear thinking about it.

I lit a Camel and hauled myself into focus. Practicalities: Get to Gloucester Road on foot. Circle Line to Farringdon. Ten minutes flailing trek to the Zetter, where Madeline, God bless her mercenary charms, would be waiting. I pulled the woollen cap down snug over my ears and began walking.

Harley had said: Grainer wants the monster not the man. You've got time. I didn't doubt he was right. There were twenty-seven days to the next full moon and thanks to the interference Harley had been running WOCOP still had me in Paris. Which knowledge sustained me for a few minutes despite the growing conviction – *this is paranoia, you're doing this to yourself* – that I was being followed.

Then, turning into Cromwell Road, the denial allowance was spent and there was nothing between me and the livid fact: I *was* being followed.

*This is paranoia*, I began again, but the mantra had lost its magic. Pressing on me from behind was warm insinuation where should have been uninterrupted cold: Surveillance. Snow and buildings molecularly swelled in urgent confirmation: *They've found you. It's already begun.*

Adrenaline isn't interested in ennui. Adrenaline floods, regardless, in my state not just the human fibres but lupine leftovers too, those creature dregs that hadn't fully conceded transformation. Phantom wolf energies and their *homo sapiens* correlates wriggled and belched in my scalp, shoulders, wrists, knees. My bladder tingled as in the too fast pitch down from a Ferris wheel's summit. The absurdity was being unable, shin-deep in snow, to quicken my pace. Harley had tried to press a Smith & Wesson

automatic on me before I'd left but I'd laughed it away. Stop being a granny. I imagined him watching now on CCTV saying, Yes, Harley the granny. I hope you're happy, Marlowe, you fucking idiot.

I tossed the cigarette and shoved my hands into my overcoat pockets. Harley had to be warned. If the Hunt was tailing me then they knew where I'd just been. The Earl's Court house wasn't in his name (masqueraded instead as what it was perfectly equipped to be, an elite rare book dealership) and had hitherto been safe. But if WOCOP had uncovered it then Harley – for nearly fifty years my double agent, my fix-it, my familiar, my friend – might already be dead.

*If, then ... If, then ...* This, aside from the business of monthly transformation, the inestimable drag of Being A Werewolf, is what I'm sick of, the endless logistics. There's a reason humans peg-out around eighty: prose fatigue. It looks like organ failure or cancer or stroke but it's really just the inability to carry on clambering through the assault course of mundane cause and effect. If we ask Sheila then we can't ask Ron. If I have the kippers now then it's quiche for tea. Four score years is about all the ifs and thens you can take. Dementia's the sane realisation you just can't be *doing* with all that any more.

My face was hot and tender. The snow's recording studio hush made small sounds distinct: someone opening a can of beer; a burp; a purse snapping shut. Across the road three drunk young men hysterically scuffled with each other. A cabbie wrapped in a tartan blanket stood by his vehicle's open door complaining into a mobile. Outside Flamingo two hotdog-eating bouncers in Cossack hats presided over a line of shivering clubbers. *Nothing like the blood and meat of the young. You can taste the audacity of hope.* Post-Curse these thoughts still shoot up like the inappropriate erections of adolescence. I crossed over, joined the end of the

queue, with Buddhist detachment registered the thudding succulence of the three underdressed girls in front of me, and dialled Harley on the secure mobile. He answered after three rings.

‘Someone’s following me,’ I said. ‘You need to get out of there. It’s compromised.’

The expected delay. He’d been drunk-doing with the phone in his hand, set to vibrate. I could picture him, creased, struggling up from the couch, hair aloft with static, fumbling for the Gauloise. ‘Harley? Are you listening? The house isn’t safe. Get out and go under.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m sure. Don’t waste time.’

‘But I mean they don’t know you’re *here*. They absolutely do not. I’ve seen the Intel updates myself. For fuck’s sake I *wrote* most of them. Jake?’

Impossible in the falling snow to get a lock on my footpad. If he’d seen me cross he’d have got into a doorway. There was a dark-haired artfully stubbled fashion-model type in a trench coat across the road ostensibly arrested by a text message, but if that was him then he was either an idiot or he wanted me to see him. No other obvious candidate.

‘Jake?’

‘Yeah. Look, don’t fuck about, Harley. Is there somewhere you can go?’

I heard him exhale, saw the aging linen-suited frame sag. It was upon him, suddenly, what it would mean if his WOCOP cover was blown. Seventy’s too old to start running. Over the phone’s drift of not silence I could sense him visualising it, the hotel rooms, the bribes, the aliases, the death of trust. No life for an old man. ‘Well, I can go to Founders, I suppose, assuming no one shoots me between here and Child’s Street.’ Founders was the Foundation, Harley’s satirically exclusive

club, sub-Jeeves butlers and state-of-the-art escorts, priceless antiques and cutting-edge entertainment technology, massage therapists, a resident Tarot reader and a three Michelin-starred chef. Membership required wealth but forbade fame; celebrity drew attention, and this was a place for the rich to vice quietly. According to Harley fewer than a hundred people knew of its existence. ‘Why don’t you let me check first?’ he said. ‘Let me get into WOCOP and—’

‘Give me your word you’ll take the gun and go.’

He knew I was right, just didn’t want it. Not now, so unprepared. I pictured him looking around the room. All the books. So many things were ending, without warning.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘*Fuck.*’

‘Call me when you get to the club.’

It did occur to me to similarly avail myself of Flamingo, since there it was. No Hunter would risk so public a hit. From the outside the night club was an unmarked dark brick front and a metal door that might have served a bank vault. Above it one tiny pink neon flamingo none but the cognoscenti would divine. In the movie version I’d go in and sneak out of a toilet window or meet a girl and start a problematic love affair that would somehow save my life at the expense of hers. In reality I’d go in, spend four hours being watched by my assassin without figuring out who it was then find myself back on the street.

I moved away from the queue. A warm beam of consciousness followed me. One glance at the glamour boy in the trench coat revealed him pocketing his mobile and setting off in my wake, but I couldn’t convince myself it was him. The ether spoke of greater refinement. I looked at my watch: 12.16. Last train from Gloucester Road wouldn’t be later than 12.30. Even at this pace I should make it. If not I’d check-in at the Cavendish and forgo Madeline, though, since I’d given her *carte blanche* with

room service over at the Zetter, I'd most likely be bankrupt by morning.

These, you'll say, were not the calculations of a being worn out by history, too full of content, emptily replete. Granted. But it's one thing to know death's twenty-seven days away, quite another to know it might be making your acquaintance *any second now*. To be murdered here, in human shape, would be gross, precipitate and – despite there being no such thing as justice – unjust. Besides, the person tracking me couldn't be Grainer. As Harley said, his lordship prized the *wulf* not the *wer*, and the thought of being despatched by anyone less than the Hunt's finest was repugnant. And this was to say nothing of my one diarist's duty still undischarged: If I was snuffed-out here and now who would tell the untellable tale? *The whole disease of your life written but for that last lesion of the heart, its malignancy and muse. God's gone, Meaning too, and yet aesthetic fraudulence still has the power to shame.*

All of which, my cynic said, as I stopped under a street lamp to light another Camel, was decent enough, unless it was just a fancy rationalisation for the sudden and desperate desire *not to die*.

At which point a silenced bullet hit the street lamp's concrete three inches above my head.



### 3

Cognitive pile-up. On the one hand I was busy cataloguing the perceptual facts – Christmas cracker snap, puff of dust, clipped ricochet – to confirm I had indeed just been shot at, on the other I was already past such redundancies and springing – yes, *springing* is the correct present participle – into the doorway of a former Bradford & Bingley for cover.

One wants clean, 007ish reactions at times like these. One *wants* all sorts of things. Backed into the urinous doorway, however, I found myself thinking (along with *oh for fuck's sake* and *Harley can publish the journals* and *what will survive of us is nothing*) of the refreshing abruptness with which financial institutions – B & B among them – had collapsed in the Crunch. Ads for banks and building societies had continued to run days, sometimes weeks after the going concerns had gone. For many it was impossible to believe, watching the green-jacketed lady in black bowler hat with her smile fusing sexual and financial know-how, that the company she represented no longer existed. I've seen this sort of thing before, obviously, the death of certainties. I was in Europe when Nietzsche and Darwin between them got rid of God, and in the United States when Wall Street reduced the American Dream to a broken suitcase and a worn-out shoe. The difference with the current crisis is

that the world's downer has coincided with my own. I must repeat: I just don't want, I really can't *take* (in both senses of the verb) any more life.

A second silenced shot buried itself thud-gasp in the B & B brick. Silver ammo? I had nothing to fear if it wasn't, but no way of finding out other than taking one in the chest and seeing if I dropped dead. (This was so typically unreasonable of the universe. Apart from a few days to do what I had to do I didn't *want* any more life. What's a few days after two hundred years? But that's the universe for you, decades of even-handedness then suddenly *zero negotiation*.) I got down on my belly. The concrete's odour of stale piss was a thing of cruel joy. Low, moving in tiny increments, I stole a look round the doorway's edge.

The supermodel in the trench coat stood twenty yards away with his back to me. His left hand was in his pocket. Either he'd shot at me and was now making a suicidal target of himself for my return fire, or the shots had come from somewhere else, in which case only clinical moronism could excuse him from not having worked that out. The scene was an Eighties album cover, his overcoated silhouette and the snow and the odd-angled cars. I was tempted to call out to him, though to communicate what, God only knew. Possibly words of love, since imminent death fills you with tenderness for the nearest life.

Hard to say how long he stood there like that. The big moments distend, allow intellectual expansion ... a disused London doorway in a twinkling becomes a public toilet; the lower animal functions pounce the second the higher ones look away; civilisation remains in Manichean deadlock with the beast ... but eventually he turned and began to walk towards me.

Flush to the wall I got back on my feet, inwardly loud with calculations. Hand-to-hand with me this marionette wouldn't last three seconds but somehow I didn't see it going that way.

Between here and the junction with Collingham Road thirty yards away there was cover, four cars parked or ditched on my side of the road and a pair of old-style phone booths on the corner. Risky. But unarmed in the doorway I was a sitting duck.

Meantime my pretty young lord and his cheekbones had halved the distance between us and stopped again. For a moment he frowned slightly, as if he'd forgotten his purpose. Then, precisely as I opened my mouth to say: What the fuck do you want?, his left hand came out of its pocket, languidly, holding a silenced .44 Magnum, a tool of such prodigious bulk it was hard to imagine him having the strength to lift and aim it. He smiled at me, however – big sensuous mouth and brilliant teeth in a bony face ensouled by dark mascara'd eyes – then with a surprisingly steady arm raised the weapon slowly and pointed it at me.

The body gets on with things while consciousness prattles. Without realising I'd bent my knees to leap (and there was the great futile ghost of wolf hindquarters, a feeling of exquisite useless memory); my hands were out, fingers spread, head full of gossip *but a shame not to see the first crocuses and if there's an afterlife but no just something like your mouth filling with soil then nothing—*

His hand – hit by a bullet – jerked and spat blood as the gun flipped away. He did a queer little simultaneous yelp and hop, staggered two steps forward clutching his wrist, then sank to his knees in the snow. His face, far from the Tragedy mask you might expect, showed something like bewildered disappointment, although as I watched, his mouth opened and stayed that way. A pendulum of spittle (a phenomenon all but exclusively appropriated by modern pornography) hung from his lower lip, stretched, broke, fell. The bullet had gone through his palm, which meant bleeding from the superficial veins only. If it had severed the median nerve there might be lasting damage, but

with today's surgical top guns I doubted it. He sat back on his heels and looked about, vaguely, as if he'd lost his hat. The Magnum might have been a cigarette butt for all the attention he paid it.

The sniper's message emerged: If I can hit our friend's hand from here I could have hit *you* anytime. It was as if we'd been having a conversation and he or she just said this, quietly.

'Who are you?' I said to the young man.

He didn't answer, but very sadly got to his feet, left forearm cradled close. The pain would be transforming the limb into something big and hot and beyond placation. With careful effort he bent, retrieved the Magnum, put it back into his coat pocket. Then without a word or further look at me he turned and began trudging away.

I didn't doubt my reading, my risk assessment, my temporary safety, but those first steps out from the shelter of the doorway called for force of will. I took three and stopped. Pictured the sniper watching through the cross-hairs and, since every mutual understanding gives *some* sort of pleasure, smiling. My back livened to all the clean cold space behind me for a silver bullet to fly through. The smell of the falling snow was a mercy, though I was sure my clothes had picked up the doorway's vicious scent of old piss. I took four more steps, five, six ... ten. Nothing happened.

The warmth of being watched never left me, but I walked to Gloucester Road without incident and boarded the last Circle Line Tube to Farringdon.

Harley had called and left a message while I was underground. He'd made it to the Foundation safely.