

"The Worthy" by Rich Norman

Being out here can change the way you look at things. When I first arrived here in the Illinois Valley, fresh from my failed career, I was just the same as I always had been, if a bit more ripe. You know the sort of fellow... an extra bright guy with a cheerful smile, and then, a temper like an armload of sweaty dynamite. Not the sort to be trifled with. But here in this place I found what I needed: a challenge! 95 acres of wilderness, and— **absolutely nothing!** I had to build it all! I am a lousy carpenter, and know of nothing but music, so... the perfect challenge!

I had never owned a dog. Grendel the Swift, my first dog, was a Corgi, an oversize tube of ridiculous furry meat with the legs missing, the paws seemingly attached with too few parts... a living piece of comedy to keep me company as I built the necessary shelter so that my wife could join me. Grendel is as all Cardigan Corgis, designed with a permanent smile attached. As a result of the characteristic skull shape endemic to the breed he was always smiling. I needed that, and as I worked through the wet winter months alone, I was not alone, I had Grendel, whose unusual body shape seemed in some way justified so as to contain an enormous bladder, a feature upon which I came to depend, as he could go 15 hours at a stretch curled up in the trailer without needing to urinate if the weather was bad. That dog was my best friend. I have never had much love for people, but animals I love, and Grendel was tops.

My wife showed up and we were a family. Like any family there was a characteristic sound to our lives. After we added my wife's unbalanced and equally noisy Kelpie pup to the mix along with our parrot, the din of our happiness could be heard for miles. Someone noticed. I heard the hissing sound and thought nothing of it. I am a city boy. A gun shot I get, but a hiss? Who cares. My dog noticed.

One afternoon the din of our lives was interrupted. The barking became intense and then as my wife watched, the cougar emerged from the brush, the sound, the hiss, then no more barking. The cougar left Grendel with his neck snapped, the two holes in the back of his head like two red eyes. He died on the couch, his eyes wide and his body paralyzed. I went nuts.

I wept and was inconsolable. For the first time in my life I felt hate, real hate—for an animal. I built the trap out of heavy timber, solid and right. The vertical channels would receive a full sheet of three fourths inch ply and it would crash down as a guillotine from seven feet, hitting the deck with a crack like a rifle. Nothing would escape. I trained the lights from my truck and tethered a cord. I amassed the weapons in the bathroom so I could spray

it with 100 rounds and kill it... while seated. I baited it.

There is not an animal stupid enough on the face of the earth to enter such a trap. You could feel the hate. I used hormones, and meat, sound and scent. He never returned. No animal on this earth would be so stupid as to have entered that trap. There was too much hate in the air. Air like sour lead.

I got a pit bull with a stout neck. A few years passed. Lily, my pit bull is not cute or smiling. She chases bears like an evil lathering gargoyle and also... cougars. One day I heard her barking like a mad thing, crazy for about half an hour. I went to see what she had treed. Her mouth was foaming and her hackles were up in a combination of fear and blood lust. A pit bull is a terrible thing once aroused, it is like hollow point ammunition, perhaps just a bit too much. I looked up into the tree and there it was. A cougar, and a large one too! I thought of all the people I knew, and all the lies they have told me, lies told with a smile and a warm look, and I remembered, and looked... looked up into the tree and saw them: those eyes. Yellow and pure, true and right as instinct, yellow and absolute. A predator, just like all the people I knew, but different, better—more honest.

So magnificent to see them!—those eyes which had pierced the darkness so long before my wife or my dog had arrived here— those eyes, so yellow and unrepentant, never shifting, only looking ahead, right to be what they are, true and worthy, and I knew, no matter how easy the shot, I could not kill it. I never took aim, the pistol never raised. How could I? Just look! How royal and magnificent to see such honesty, such cold and pure honesty which never pretends! This animal had the integrity of 1000 men. I could not kill it. Just look at those eyes!— Not a lie in sight.

Oregon resident Rich Norman, is a writer and musician with degrees in philosophy and music. Known as "The Laughing Recluse," he is the author of books spanning philosophy, psychology, and novels, with topics ranging from psychoanalytic theory to existential philosophy, verse and fiction. All text in this column is printed with the permission of, and remains the sole property of, the author, Rich Norman. Contact: rich@richnorman.com