

Lepus Europaeus

My name is Jack Lago. I used to be a cop. Now, I'm called a law enforcement special consultant. That means when the case goes weird, I get called in. By the way, I also hate holiday crimes. Needless to say, I'm in a real bad mood right now. Lucky me, I made the mistake of answering a call from the graveyard shift. The call came in at two in the morning, a noise complaint. A couple of uniforms checked it out and kicked it up to me. If it gets to me, somebody is dead, dead in a weird way.

Small snowflakes began sticking to my coat as soon as I got out of the car. These late spring storms drop a little snow at night, but the sun usually wipes it all out by rush hour. I looked at the retail strip center. Nothing appeared burned or broken, so I started walking towards the shops. An officer stepped out of a breezeway in the middle and motioned to me.

"Over here, sir."

I nodded and watched the potentially slick ground as I walked. I don't know why I was looking down so closely. I'm used to walking on winter's little gifts, but the tracks in the snow kept catching my attention. The footprints of the officers and a few other shoe prints going this way and that were expected. What stuck in my mind were the long narrow ones and a few that looked like hoof prints. There's

just no telling what you will find in the middle of the night in New Jersey.

"Sir, it's back here." The officer urged me down the breezeway to the backside of the center.

"I'm coming," I said as I pulled my camera out of my pocket and snapped a couple of shots.

The alleyway looked like a train wreck. It was shocking to see the commercial dumpsters flipped like wastepaper baskets leaving trash everywhere. Against the back fence, I saw the area the officers had taped off. Normally, a crime scene in New Jersey is a flurry of flashing lights, people, and noise. This one's distinguishing characteristic - quiet. Quiet always meant murder, a bad one. No murder is good, some are just worse than others. I stepped under the tape and turned to one of the officers.

"What have we got here?"

"I don't really know, sir. This is how we found the scene. We haven't touched a thing." The pasty look on his face told me this wasn't a normal crime scene.

I took a few more snapshots then put on my evidence gloves. Carefully, I lifted away a battered sheet of cardboard; its underside covered in blood. Everything underneath it had been completely soaked in blood. The more trash I moved and photographed, the more blood I found. The one thing I didn't find was a body.

I stood up and looked around the alleyway again. There had been one hell of a fight here and someone obviously didn't make it out alive. The soft snow coated everything and should make the crime scene easy to read. Instead, there were no drag marks, no blood trail, and only minimal splatter evidence across the face of the fence. I looked around into the expectant eyes of the two officers standing there watching me.

"Has anyone got a witness statement yet?" I asked the first one.

"No, sir, not yet." He pulled out his notebook in anticipation of my next order.

"Okay, you take care of whoever called this in." The first officer walked away with purpose.

I turned to the second officer. "Call this in for a complete crime scene work up. I don't want another soul back here trampling the evidence. Got it?"

"Yes sir. Sir, I ..." His voice faded out like he was trying to tell me something he didn't want to say.

"What is it?" I looked at his badge and read his name. "Out with it, Baker."

"Well, there's one more thing. I was first on the scene. When I walked back here," he paused, "I heard something."

I could see the distress in his eyes. I asked the next question in a reassuring voice. "Heard what?"

He sighed as if he was putting his career on the line with something wild like a UFO sighting out in the woods. Reports like that stick with you for years and don't let go. "I heard something flapping, like big wings. I don't know how else to describe it."

"Thanks, Baker. I won't put it in unless it means something."

"Thank you sir, let me get this called in." He walked back up the breezeway with the gait of a relieved man.

I made my notes and took more snapshots. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but I learned long ago to record everything and sort it out later. I began to walk back to my car where I could wait somewhere warm and there were those weird footprints again. Now that my eyes were accustomed to picking them out, they were everywhere, both kinds. The long ones and the hoof prints seemed to

be chasing each other all around the area. The flapping comment stuck in my mind and made me look up into the black sky and listen. All I could hear was the soft hiss of falling snow.

The car heater fought to provide relief from the cold as I collected my notes and thoughts. The real question was how someone got a bloody corpse out of there without leaving a trail. The first officer I had sent for a statement returned just as the crime scene team arrived. I got out of the car just as the heater had made it worthwhile to stay. I walked over to the team leader, Petrofski. She was as good as they came on the topic of how someone got dead.

"We really got to stop meeting like this." She quipped as I walked over. "People are starting to talk."

"Oh well. Guess what? You guys called me, so now we got us another holiday special. This one is shaping up to go really weird on us." I guided her down the breezeway and stopped at the edge of the alleyway. She would want to get her own bearings and I had learned not to interfere with her or her team.

"We have a body over there I suppose?" She asked pointing to the bloody pile of trash.

"That's where we have a body's worth of blood, but no body and no visible exit point." I answered. I looked the scene over one more time as she looked it over for the first. The odd prints weighed on my mind. "Before your team gets back here, I need you to check something for me."

She looked at me and sighed. "And here comes the weird part, right?"

"Just get me an I.D. on what could make these kinds of marks. Let's just assume some kind of homemade snow gear or something like that." I knelt down and pointed out the odd tracks. She looked them over and nodded.

"Don't worry. I got you covered."

"Thanks. Let me know some results as soon as possible. I want to get this wrapped up before church hits in a few hours." I stood up and stepped back.

"I'll do what I can, Lago."

I walked back up the breezeway to get out of her team's way and find out what the witness had to say. Several people passed me carrying armloads of equipment that would turn that mess back there into evidence I could use. I saw the officer I was looking for. A quick look at his badge got me his name.

"What have you got, Owens?"

"The witness lives on the other side of the fence. She's elderly and lives alone. She woke up to all kinds of animal noises. She got spooked and called it in."

"Animal noises? No voices or anything she could understand?"

"No sir. She said animal noises, like a donkey or horse or something like that." He read his notes carefully.

I hate holiday crimes. They always go weird on you. So, I have a murder scene with lots of blood, but no body. Now, I have animal sounds, weird prints, and something that flaps. "She see anything?"

"She said that once the noises got started, she called it in and stayed inside."

"At least she had sense enough to stay put and call." I chewed on my bottom lip. This was going to get even more frustrating. I just knew it.

"Umm, sir, there is something in her yard I think you should see." Officer Owens ventured cautiously.

"What is it?" I already knew what he was going to say.

"There are some kind of prints in the snow across her yard."

"Are they long and narrow or are they like hoof prints?"

Owens, visibly startled by my question, looked around nervously, then faced me. His eyes, wide open as he answered. "They are long and narrow. How did you know?"

I smiled at the street hardened, but still young face. "Just call it a hunch, Owens. Just call it a hunch."

Owens still had that look on his face when I saw Officer Baker walking over. I figured if this case was going to get weird, I was going to have witnesses. I rubbed my hands together and blew into them in a vain attempt to ward off the cold. It wasn't really that bad, just cold enough to be uncomfortable. I gathered my two volunteers, or maybe I should say conscripts and walked around the corner of the block. Just like I expected, there they were, long narrow tracks laid out side by side. I tried to figure out how you could make tracks like that. I didn't like what came to mind.

Baker said it first. "The only way you can make a track like that would be to hop."

We all thought it, but I wasn't going to say it out loud. He realized what he had said and started shaking his head. He looked up at me and I could almost hear him blaming me for roping him into this. I didn't fault him for the look in his eyes. I had the same look the first time a case I was on went weird. Who knows, he might even make detective some day. That is, if he doesn't take early retirement due to mental stress. I think that's what they call going crackers these days.

"Anybody figure out which way this thing came from?" I asked to see if we could find something to do while we waited on the crime scene results. Owens had already started walking across the yard following the trail.

"I think it was going from house to house until it found the gate open here." Owens pointed to the evidence to back up his theory.

I pulled my keys out and tossed them to Baker and told both officers, "Go back and park your cruisers. Bring my car around and call in that the two of you are coming with me. We're going to back track this thing and see where it's been."

They both nodded and walked away. I would have a few minutes alone before they got back, so I kept following the trail. Whoever or whatever made this put in a lot of effort. I walked over half the block and the prints were still going. At the end of the block, I stopped and took a deep breath. There was just what I didn't want to see, but knew I would find. A trail of hoof print looking tracks crossed the long narrow ones. Did I mention holiday crimes always get weird?

I waited there for the officers to come get me. I had traced the two paths as far as I needed to. If nothing else, this was going to be interesting. As I stood there in the dark and cold, I stamped my feet for warmth and almost missed it. Just at the outside edge of my hearing, something was there. I stood stone still with one hand under my coat on my gun. I know I shouldn't really carry one these days, but I have a license to carry and when you have something weird flapping around in the middle of the night you are happy to have one. There it was again, more flapping. I tried as hard as I could to make out where the sound was coming from. I cocked my head from side to side. I got the impression that the sound came from very high overhead, but it was getting closer.

The growl of the car engine drowned out the soft winged sound as the officers returned with my car. I

motioned for them to kill the engine. They both got out and remained silent. The three of us stood there like bizarre yard gnomes each posed for listening. I could see their eyes as they heard the sound. I motioned for them to remain quiet. The flapping appeared to be directly over us and then it moved towards the shopping center where it sounded like it landed.

Baker had been driving so I jumped in the passenger side and Owens just made it into the back seat before we were sliding down the street. Baker killed the lights as we pulled into the parking lot. He patrolled slowly around the perimeter then methodically swept the area in a classic search pattern. Owens pulled out my spot light and began checking the top of the building. At the far end of the center, we got a shadow. Baker pulled the car out away from the building, but angled in so Owens could hit it with the spotlight again. The powerful halogen beam leapt out and reflected back two red glowing points just above the edge of the building. Whatever it was, we had it on the roof. Now what?

We could see the crime team still coming and going from their vehicles. They either thought we were crazy and ignored us or just plain ignored us. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the fire department's paramedic van pulling in. There was no one for them to save, but I had a use for that van.

I don't know why I whispered when I spoke, but I did. "Baker, run over there and get that meat wagon over here. I have an idea."

He didn't ask any questions or say anything. He didn't have to; the look on his face said it all. He just got slowly out of the car and walked steadily across the parking lot. Steady, unless you count the death lock he had on the grip

of his gun. I nodded to Owens as we both got out and watched. The two red points still glowed from the edge of the roof. They moved every so often like glowing eyes watching us and the other activities across the parking lot.

After a couple of minutes, I glanced over and saw Baker headed back with the paramedics. The van rolled slowly to a stop. The driver was looking to see what we had spotlighted.

"You got a small fire hose on that rig, right?" I asked hopefully.

"Yeah. What do you have in mind?" The gum-smacking driver answered.

"Think it will reach up there?" I nodded towards the red reflections.

He looked up, smacked his gum a couple more times then finally said, "It should hit it pretty good."

"Owens, you keep the light on that thing. Baker, take this camera and get a picture of this idiot when we get him to stand up." I tossed him a disposable camera and continued. "If some fool hang glides in onto a roof at night, we'll get his wings wet and see if he wants to fly off of there."

The paramedics rolled out the sprayer and adjusted the nozzle for spray, not the normal setting for mist. Everyone looked ready.

"Hit it."

The water arched up the side of the building then right on the glowing red spots. They went out. We kept the water going for a moment more until something screamed. It sounded like a cross between a mule braying and fingernails on a chalkboard. I'm not sure what happened next, but I saw the camera flash go off and something sail off that roof right at us. Water went everywhere with

something big in the middle of it all. It looked like a starved horse with very short front legs, long back legs and huge bat wings. We all hit the deck. It swooped low over us and disappeared into the night.

After we all got done cussing and exclaiming, I retrieved my camera and we calmed the paramedics down. There for a couple of minutes, I thought we were going to have to call for more paramedics to take care of our first ones. Eventually, we got it all settled down and finished up the crime scene.

Dawn finally arrived so I decided to head into the police station to figure this mess out and wait for the crime scene reports. Owens and Baker both brought me their reports. They did as good a job as they could under the circumstances. They both had that "UFO in the woods" look on their faces. Afraid they were right, I sent the camera down for developing. It was all just a matter of time now, or so I thought.

With the full sunrise came the calls, hundreds of them. People all over the area reported strange prints in the snow. There were prints on walls, trees, rooftops, sidewalks, and fences. It was like these things had actually run all over town until they met up behind the strip center. The station literally had every available officer out taking reports and doing their best to control the rumors that had already begun flying. The sun managed to warm things up enough by Easter Service to erase the snow and the enigmatic prints. There were still a few trapped in mud puddles here and there. The crime scene team managed to take some very poor quality plaster casts before those tracks disappeared.

The combination of church and sunshine finally got everyone's mind off of the odd prints and the day looked

like it was going to settle down. I sat down behind my old, but now honorary desk and leaned back until my chair creaked in protest. My mind ran over the events of the past few hours. Nothing really made sense, at least not yet. Hopefully, the crime scene reports and, if I got real lucky, a photograph or two would clear all this up.

Owens and Baker were the first ones in from the streets with the plaster casts. I read the look in their eyes as they walked up to my desk. They had the look of men condemned to working with me on every crackpot case that comes in from now on. They looked like they were bringing me the proverbial UFO from the woods.

"What have we got, guys?" I figured I would start this morbid little party right. Baker just shook his head from side to side and looked at Owens.

"We showed them where to take the casts, but I'm not sure about them." Owens set them carefully on the desk as if they were snakes he didn't want to wake.

"Baker, get me a sand box and let's see what we got here." I began unfolding the crumpled newspaper. There they were, dirty plaster casts with one set in the shape of a hoof, the other set was long and narrow with some kind of little bumps at one end. I held each up in turn. Casts are actually the negatives to the footprints. Sometimes, pressing them into clean, moist sand can give you better idea of what you are looking at than what you saw at a crime scene. I could see Baker coming back with his hands full. I shoved a few things aside to make room.

"Just set it here." I pointed to the clear spot.

He set the box down and opened the lid. Owens took the little smoothing tool to the surface of the sand a couple of times to make sure there were no stray marks to fool us

later. I looked the hoof prints over and held them for everyone to see.

"Let's try these first." I announced and everyone nodded in agreement. Carefully, I laid them out on the sand then pressed them in. We waited just a moment to make sure the imprint took. As I lifted the casts, I said, "Here goes nothing." Everyone held their breath as I pulled the casts away. We all stared for a full minute. I don't know what we expected to find, but when you press hoof print shaped casts into sand, guess what, you get hoof prints. In this case, they appeared to be the hoof prints of an unshod pony. We all looked at the prints then looked at each other. Three pairs of eyes all looked back at the prints and then met in the middle again.

Baker took a deep breath and shrugged. He shook his head and said, "Well, I guess this means the chemical plant down by the river gets to explain a flying pony that runs up walls and eats people."

Owens and I just looked at him. He smiled at us and continued, "Hey, it makes about as much sense as anything else we've seen."

He had us there. What brilliant thing was I going to deduce that sounded any less outlandish? I decided that ducking the issue was the best way to go at this point.

"Okay guys," I sighed. "Go home and get some rest. I'll let you know what we get from Petrofski's report."

They looked relieved as they got away from the sand box and my desk. I was happy they were ready to go because I wanted to try the long tracks and I had a suspicion they really didn't want to know about it. I smoothed the sand and carefully placed the casts in the box. I pressed them in deeply and hesitated before I lifted them. I set my teeth firmly together as if this were a weight lifting

Lepus Europaeus

exercise and pulled the casts out. I stared at the prints for a while. The odd bumps at the front of the cast made little claw like marks at the end of a long narrow foot. A childhood memory of trying to catch a cottontail came to mind. I remembered seeing a track like this back then. The only difference would be scale. This rabbit would have been an elephant among rabbits and we never saw any front prints. A flying pony and now a giant walking rabbit; I erased the sand and sat down heavily in my complaining chair.

I closed my eyes and began working up the "official" story. This process is sort of like taking a bite out of an exotic meal then making up the recipe and how it was cooked. It doesn't matter if you are vaguely close to the truth. All that matters is the story covers the basic points.

"Lepus europaeus."

The words were accompanied by a thump of a report folder landing on the battered desk. Petrofski's voice had the sound of a mother demanding to know why she found a frog in the refrigerator. I opened my eyes and spun the chair around to face her.

"Leapy what?" I had to ask.

"Lepus europaeus is what the blood and hair analysis came back with. You want to tell me what the hell is going on here?" Petrofski didn't look amused as she waited for an answer.

"What is a lepus eurowhatsit?" My look of ignorance was quite sincere. I didn't have a clue what she was talking about.

She gave me a condescending look then took the attitude that she was about to be one up on me. She answered, "Lepus europaeus is the Latin name for the common European brown hare. What are we doing with a

crime scene full of European rabbit fur and enough rabbit blood for a couple dozen bunnies?"

One fact happily leapt to my mind, she had not seen the thing on the roof. I had one way out of explaining killer flying ponies so I took it. I said, "I am not so sure we actually have a crime scene per say."

"What do you mean?" She waited for more.

I scrambled mentally to my tiptoes. "What I mean is - someone may have been butchering their rabbits back there. That would explain the fur and the blood and maybe even the noise our elderly witness called in."

"If that's the case, then we are out of it. This sounds more like a case for the health department or possibly an animal cruelty case if we ever find out what happened to the rabbits." Petrofski sounded like I was going to get away with it until she continued. "So what about all those weird tracks all over the place?"

I still had one more good dance step left in me. "I'm going to go over those with the meteorological guys and see if those weren't the work of something freaky about the snow this late in the year.

Petrofski just shrugged and pushed the papers closer to me and said, "Well, just let me know how you want to close this one out." She turned and began to walk off. She called back over her shoulder, "I have more work to get done, and oh yeah, let me know what really happened some day."

Okay, so I didn't get away clean, but I got away clean on paper and that's all that really counts anyway. I was still going to check with one more person before I gave up on this one. Everyone knows someone that seems to know just a little too much about UFO's, Bigfoot, sea monsters, and the tooth fairy. I bundled up the files, casts, and everything else connected with this case and headed for the photo lab.

I signed for my pictures, stuffed them in my coat pocket and made it to my car without having to answer any more questions.

As I drove, I tried to collect my thoughts. How was I going to approach this? I came up with several clever ploys. I picked the best couple as I pulled into the driveway. Good, his car was here. Hollis Ickerson knew everything there was to know about any obscure topic you could think of and I was going to put him to the test. I carried my armload of stuff up to his door and knocked. Hollis answered and all my great thoughts abandoned me. My clever ploy turned out to be handing him the armload and saying, "What do you make of all this?"

Two hours later and I still sat there while Hollis dug through the evidence. I was ready to start chewing the wallpaper while he just kept looking through the stuff again and again. The occasional hmmm or headshake was all I got. I finally remembered the photos and pulled them out of my pocket and flipped through them. I felt a cold chill run down my spine as I looked at the last picture. There that thing was, right there on film. We had really seen the thing. Hollis noticed the look on my face.

"What have you got there?" He asked expectantly.

"Alright, you tell me what you think, then I'll show you the picture." I had to know if he came up with the same idiotic answer that was sitting in my brain.

Hollis cleared his throat and began, "You know how Halloween is supposed to be the night the spirit world can come out to play and full moons are supposed to make people act funny? The whole magic in the air thing complete with portals to the other side; the dead walking the world of the living."

"Yeah." I looked him in the eye. "That's what the costumes are all about right? Trust me, you learn all about full moons when you're a cop or a doctor."

"Okay, let's just assume that Halloween is not the only time of the year when things can get a little supernatural. Most modern holidays correspond with older pagan celebrations. Easter is a good example."

I nodded. "Sounds fair enough."

"And that the New Jersey Pine Barrens have their own legend." He prompted.

"We got the Jersey Devil or something like that."

"Exactly." Hollis looked at me like I was about to get a gold star. He raised his eyebrows expectantly and waited for me to make a few connections.

I tried to wait him out, but the thoughts were already running amok. I leaned back and rubbed my face with both hands. "So, you are trying to tell me that Easter is kind of like Halloween in the fact that things could get a little supernatural or magical or whatever and that this means the Jersey Devil could get out and go running around."

"Exactly." Hollis absolutely beamed. I just felt like an idiot with a new village. Hollis continued, "Do you remember that movie with the giant invisible rabbit?"

"Umm, the one that hung out in bars and insane asylums?" I had the feeling that the mental version of a train wreck was about to happen.

"That's the one." He affirmed. It scared me to think Hollis was getting into all this and still smiling. He had that lecture look in his eye again. "It was called a pooka, which is described in the movie as, 'From old Celtic mythology, a fairy spirit in animal form, always very large. It is a benign, but mischievous creature.'"

"Wait, wait, wait." My brain just took a hard left and I think the rest of me slid into the passenger seat. "You're trying to tell me that one of those things got loose as well, and then got the stuffing kicked out of it."

Hollis smiled as he leaned back in his chair and smugly said, "If you have better theory, I would love to hear it. Quid pro quo?"

"Squid what?"

Hollis looked annoyed then said, "Let's see this picture. I told you what I think. Let's have it."

I put my precious picture in his hand. He looked at it very closely for several minutes. He finally handed it back to me and said, "Welcome to the club."

"What club?"

"The 'I think I saw something - check out my blurry picture' club." Hollis said with practiced ease. "The same club millions of people are in. We see something strange, we get the best evidence we can, and it still won't be enough. Even if you dropped a body on the desk, the world still won't believe you because it messes with the 'normal' way of thinking of the world."

I looked at the picture again. Sure enough, my memory was filling in the blurred parts. You could almost make out what it was, but not quite. It had been moving too fast. I thanked him for his help and loaded all my junk back into the car, after promising Hollis he could have the casts when I was done with them. Now that I had enough information to make a somewhat rational report, I think I will stick with somebody getting a few rabbits ready for the stew pot and freaky weather. There is no way I am going to turn in a report that says in the modern world ancient magical portals opened up and we wound up with the fact that last night the Jersey Devil ate the Easter Bunny.

Commentary:

This story was the result of too many mystery movies one weekend. The first few drafts went a very sad direction. They just didn't have that "right" flavor.

Then I decided to take a little Mike Hammer and mix with an Asimov influence and I came up with Jack Lago; a career damaged, semi-retired, no nonsense detective. Jack has now become one of those characters that grow beyond their original story.

I was completely shocked when this story won the 2006 Darrell Award for Best Short Story. When I heard that *Lepus* had made it to the finals, I was already more than happy. After reviewing the other finalists, I figured I was in for a nice dinner and offering my congratulations to the winner. Well, surprises happen.

There are lots of things that go bump in the night for Jack to investigate. That means, I get to do a lot more reading into arcane facts and events, then I get to cover whiteboard after whiteboard with a bizarre series of assumptions, plots, schemes, suppositions, and the occasional factual notation. Eventually, it all comes together into a story.