

SOME MOLECULAR SELF-ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

By RdotTornello © 2009 revised 2015

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The Village *idiot* Press

Fifty to one hundred tree rats, otherwise known as squirrels, swarmed out of the woods en masse. The driver of the roadster stopped short. Running over one or two was one thing, but this? This was impossible. The driver, his head swiveling, watched with amazement as the river of grey and black surrounded the car.

Raccoons followed behind the squirrels. The bandits chewed the tires flat before the driver knew what was happening. As odd as that was, the heavy thud on the hood, with the grey wolf peering into the driver's eyes, was startling, unexpected and down right unnerving. Following the noise, the scene to his left was one of the last the driver ever viewed. A huge bear was tearing the driver's door off its hinges. The driver heard crows calling. It was the last audible and recognizable sound before he died.

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The police report was inconclusive except to state the door had been ripped off, and the victim had been mauled by a bear. He had died of a heart attack. Additionally it was reported that there were wolf tracks everywhere, along with squirrel and raccoon fur inside and outside. The report mentioned the chewed up interior. No explanation was given.

The detective shook his head as he reviewed the photos.

This was the strangest case he had ever handled. There were no "real" clues and no suspects. No bear could be tracked in the muddled chaos left by dozens -- maybe hundreds -- of assorted furry felons. There were no wolves loitering near the crime scene to be questioned -- and downtown was insisting it was a crime scene, because the experts said that there was no way that a wild animal would attack and kill a man inside a car.

Still, the detective found himself wondering about the why and the how of it. There were no half eaten raccoons or squirrels. What wolf or bear would pass those appetizers up? And

anyway, there were no wolves or bears in the area big enough to do that kind of damage, at least not for fifty or a hundred years.

He read and re-read the report, viewed the photos, went to the scene (still festooned with yellow-and-black "CRIME SCENE -- DO NOT CROSS" tape), and still had no idea how to handle the case.

The driver of the roadster, had been a 45 year old engineer. He had lived in one of the many subdivisions that had sprouted during the great housing boom and bust of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and was married with two children. He was involved in local community affairs and was generally liked. His TRW credit score was good, if not great -- no signs of debts that might mean any human might have reason to kill him. Otherwise there was very little of note.

There were no incidences of medical emergencies. To make sure, he requested the victim's health records. Maybe there was something in his history that would just wrap this part up.

The animal stuff, forget it. But Annie wouldn't have. Annie, his former wife, would have had all sorts of reasons for the animals to do this. She used to rescue anything that breathed. She even spent a year taming a stray kitten that had taken to living in a drainage pipe by a local fast food joint. With patience and he had to admit, love, she caught it. She'd always claimed that animals could speak to you if you listened... Of course, Annie was a nut, clinically insane, and eventually, when nothing worked, when she had been locked up in a secure psych ward with no prospects for release, he'd had to divorce her.

So, the detective thought, assume that a man -- or woman -- murdered the guy, maybe drugging him to induce a heart attack, and spraying him with something to attract predators. Sounds great, up to a point -- but it wouldn't explain why at least four distinct species ignored each other.

He had other cases assigned to him, but the "murder" of this lone individual by what seemed to be a bear, impossible as it was, stuck in his mind. The engineer's injuries certainly had not been caused by a person dressed up as a bear. Does a bear shit in the woods? You bet. It also leaves tracks, claw marks on trees, bits of fur stuck on the undergrowth, and even DNA-laden saliva, all of which the Forensics guys found and experts from the zoo had identified. How did it get to this area unnoticed? And then there were the wolf tracks -- big wolf tracks...

His first thought was that the evidence had to be planted. Like the experts said, the scenario was impossible. Top-of-the-food-chain predators like wolves and bears did not work and play well together. And individually, they wouldn't pass up the furry smorgasbord that had laid itself out around the engineer's car. His experience told him somewhere right in front of him, there was an explanation. He was missing something that was there for him, a clue, rational or otherwise.

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The detective went home and mentioned the case to his son Bill. His son had moved back in with dear old Dad after finishing his undergrad degree, a common practice these days with jobs scarce and housing still expensive. Now he was taking advantage of the free accommodations and working on a Masters degree. The detective was glad for the company though he had somewhat ambivalent feelings toward him. His son was one of those eco-nuts, a tree hugging idiot. The detective blamed his ex-wife -- she'd given the kid her brains and her love for science and nature, but unfortunately, she'd also passed on some of the ideas that led to her commitment to Greenfields Psychiatric institute. Of course, cringing every time Bill said something that reminded him of Annie made the detective feel guilty as hell. A father was supposed to love his children unconditionally. But he'd loved Annie, too...

As he walked in he said, "This case is the weirdest one I ever caught. They found a guy -- well, what was left of him -- in his car out on Braddock Road. It looks like a pissed-off bear tore the door off the car, then pretty much pulped him. Looked like every other animal bigger than a mouse had a go at him, too..."

It was his version of 'Hello, how are you today?' -- He didn't expect a serious response.

But he heard Bill say, "Oh shit! It finally happened."

"What happened?" The detective was willing to listen to anything or anyone who could explain the engineer's death.

Bill frowned and shrugged. "I didn't say anything."

Then the detective thought he heard him mutter "Mother Nature is finally biting back."

He groaned. "Please, skip the tree hugging BS, OK? I had enough of that from --" He caught himself before he said "your mother", but I have a murder to solve. Nobody downtown believes the animals whacked this guy without some two-legged help. We got wildlife experts with books and goddamn PowerPoint slideshows proving that animals don't behave that way. I'm getting all kinds of pressure, quiet but pressure nonetheless."

Bill shook his head, exasperated. "I don't know what BS you mean. But if you followed this stuff like I do you would have noticed that there were similar incidents in different parts of the country all this week," Bill said. "And some reported in Canada too." He held up a fistful of paper. For a tree-hugger, he killed more than his share printing stuff from the web.

The detective grunted. "Let me see that, kid. Sorry I went off on you." He had been too busy as well as understaffed to look at the internet for similar news. Besides, he'd figured this case had to be unique.

"No problem," Bill said. "But I didn't say anything."

He looked at his son thinking; *Don't play games with my head, especially when I need to eat. All I need is to start hearing things. There are too many stupid head-cases as it is. And all watching those TV shows with mind-readers and mediums and thinking they have the power...*

Bill chuckled. "Hey dad, you should keep stuff like that to yourself. If they hear you at work your boss will begin to question your sanity".

"I didn't say anything," The detective said aloud but thought at the same time, *this job is getting to me. I need a vacation.*

"Then take one," Bill said. "Go away for a few days, a week. Go. You have it coming. You must have six months of unused leave time."

Hardly a word had been spoken. They had a full conversation, half of it silent, without realizing it. Priorities in their lives, the murder for the detective, a date and dinner for his Bill, seemed to overwhelm cognition of their nonverbal/verbal interaction.

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The next morning, the detective said, "Bill, I am going to follow your advice, for once. I'm packing and taking a week off. I have the time." He thought, Maybe this will clear my head so

when I get back I'll be able to see this in a new light. Maybe, anyway just maybe... This case, it's unlike anything I've ever seen -- and I've seen a lot of bizarre shit.

Aloud, he said, "Anything interesting in your whatever-you-call-them -- not classes, seminars, lab experiments?"

"Oh, some new stuff on genetics. We're investigating the FOX transcription factors and speech development."

The detective gave him the "speak English, please" look that he'd developed before Bill had been born, to cope when Annie talked over his head.

Bill grinned. "Okay, let me put it this way: We're looking into the changes to the brain that occurred about 100,000 years ago -- the ones that allowed both Neanderthals and modern humans to speak. According to the research, we -- modern people and Neanderthals -- both have the same version of the FOXP2 gene. It's interesting. I was wondering about what coordinated accident could open the path that changed us so much from all the other mammals. We speak. Everything living has some version of FOXP2 which is implicated in speech, even bird songs. It's as if there was a natural radiation explosion that caused a giant mutation at some party, or watering hole where both species were gathered."

The only part that registered was the term "coordinated action". A flash of an idea: If the incidents Bill printed out happened far enough apart in time, it could mean one person or one group was responsible for them all. A circus? Some show with trained animals? I need to see if there is a link to the victims, see if the timing works for one outfit moving by road or rail...

The detective shook his head. He was going on vacation; the last thing he wanted was to get his motor revving now. "While I'm gone let me remind you to please call the exterminator. The ants and bugs are all over the place. Make sure they check for termites"

"Did it already."

That's different. I didn't have to ask twice. They must be too much, even for Nature Boy, he thought with a smile.

Bill stuck out his tongue in reply, but the detective had already closed the door behind him.

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His boss had not been thrilled that the detective was leaving his caseload with nobody to handle it -- there was no way anybody else on the squad could add his assignments on top of their own. But the union raised hell anytime a vacation request got turned down for anything short of a terrorist attack, so the Engineer/Animal-Attack case and all the rest would wait for his return.

The detective rented a cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, pretty isolated, accessible only by a long, winding dirt road. At this time of year, few of the neighboring cabins was occupied, so it was maybe too quiet at first, no human voices, no cars, no sirens, no phones and ear-jabbing music leaking from ear buds. But he got used to it pretty quickly.

He went for a walk along a mountain path. It was beautiful. He felt he could enjoy the view, take in natural beauty that was still there. He was alone and for once in as long as he could remember, calm.

The detective hated to admit it, but Bill had been right. He needed this vacation, and maybe, just maybe his son was correct about some of his other wacko assumptions. He decided to go back to the cabin he had rented and have a glass of wine, a sandwich and ... he wasn't sure what else. The cabin was one of the older Craftsman style designed structures, made of seasoned woods and stone with a quality unlike the flimsy slapped together glue and plastic monstrosities dotting the landscape in the valley below. The only thing missing in the cabin was a gym, weights or a basic machine. He felt out of sorts if he didn't exercise. Annie had always teased him --

"Damn it, Annie isn't here. Bill isn't here. The goddamn engineer/murder case isn't here. Relax, try and relax, 'cancel, cancel'," he repeated over and over.

By the time he made it back to the cabin, he was relaxed, or worn out from trying to relax. Lounging on the screened in porch, he dozed.

Waking up later, he tried to recall what he could remember from one vivid dream. He enjoyed the recharge naps as he called them. His short naps most always produced this kind of dreams.

The recall was a drill, an exercise for memory. He thought about it. Talking out loud helped. It gave him an almost a disinterested voice, a second person so to speak, to study a given situation. The detective began, "In the dream, the animals could communicate with each other. All the chemicals people had been dumping for decades had combined in random ways, drugs and radioactive dyes mixing and becoming something new. The blood-brain barrier had been compromised; new circuits had formed in the brains of every species that had to live in that toxic soup. Some form of telepathy became possible. A form of interactive intelligence was developing... like that living-planet shit Bill talked about, Gay-uh, Guy-uh The animals were organizing in a rudimentary fashion to protect themselves against the human's predation."

"I should write a story. Get it published, get a movie deal. No more stinking murders, crazy people, or politicians to deal with. Ha, very funny. Get real." He headed toward the kitchen door to go inside.

He saw a chipmunk run by. "Cute little rodent." The Detective turned around when he thought he heard someone say, "He's finally awake."

"Hello, hello, anyone there? OK I'm going crazy too. It's got to be the water or I've been alone too long. Right? I'm talking to myself all the time now." He walked into the kitchen with the large window overlooking a field. He looked out one side and said, "No one in there."

Then he turned looked out the window again. He found himself staring at the biggest wolf he had ever seen. Of course, he'd never seen a live one before, so any wolf would have been the biggest one he'd ever seen -- but this one was huge, as tall as a Great Dane but with massive shoulders and jaws that looked like they could crush a bowling ball. He looked at it and it looked straight back, straight into the detective's eyes.

Wolves work in packs, he thought. Where are the others? Why weren't we told that wolves had migrated this far East? Where are the others? Do I want to know? He was deciding whether or not to get his gun. He decided he was inside. He was safe. Just observe. He was almost hypnotized by the beast. "Lovely creature," he whispered to himself.

"Yes we are," a thought responded.

The hair on his body stood on end. He didn't move. He was frozen, not in fear but in wonder, surprise and to use the word in its proper terms, awe. "This is still a dream. I'm Zhang Zi. A great dream, but a dream none the less."

No, this is not a dream. In his head came the same smooth deep powerful, almost feminine voice he heard before.

While he was sorting this all out, noises from beneath the stout wooden floor became more pronounced. There was squeaking and more squeaking from all over. Mice, he thought, dozens of them. It's the forest, their home but still...

"It belongs to us all," came mental the voice again.

"I'm going nuts. My son has gotten to me. I'm going crazy." Then he thought, *What if all those 'crazy people' he'd heard about that claimed they could talk to animals were legit?*

"You're not crazy. We have been able to do this for decades. You and your kind caused this, by letting the waste from your factories and farms flow unheeded into the water and the soil. In fact some of you, yourself included, can do it too. You deny it. We all have restructured neural pathways based upon the nano carbon technology you introduced to the planet. It forced the rewiring of all our brains. A little molecular self-assembly, if you will."

The detective thought he discerned a bit of a laugh.

"My dream," The detective said. "It wasn't a dream. You were talking to me, telling me --"

The wolf continued, "All animals can communicate and with each other. And you are nothing but an animal. You and your kind, in you hubris and ignorance, your selfishness, you thought you were immune from the effects you caused. Not so. We can wait. We have waited this long; a little longer won't matter."

He nodded. "I -- I understand."

One more thing to ponder, the wolf said in the detective's mind, if someone were destroying your home, killing your children, what would you do?

His hands tightened into fists. "If this is a dream, it's is a doozie," he said to himself.

He looked at the wolf. It did not move. Still, he made no move for his service .45. He knew he should, knew that by coming to this place, he had put himself in the same kind of situation as the engineer in his car -- alone, with no witnesses to anything that might happen to him. No human witnesses, that is.

The animal had a powerful charisma and the detective couldn't turn away. He didn't care. He wasn't going outside. That much he knew.

Outside was coming to him.

THE END

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