

FINDING OUR VOICES

By Richard Tornello © 2010

Chapter I

A DEEP BREATH,

He was sated; blood still stained his muzzle. He thought, "Later for them." It was dusk when the lone gray wolf viewed the stag and doe from a downwind location. "They can't travel too far," and guessed as to their territorial range. It had become smaller than was natural, but that was the case for all of the wild as the suburbs encroached. The wolf was old and he was smart. "No use spending energy just for the chase. I'll save it for when needed. Besides I don't want to be observed by the humans. I am too close to their habitat." He had no defense against their technology except stealth. I want to see just how alert that stag is." He let out a deep breath. It was intentional.

The buck's ears picked up. He sensed danger. "No movement? No movement?" Ever so slowly he led his mate away from the area. The buck did not like something about this place. He trusted his feelings. He has lived a long time too. He headed for the small back woods road. There he stood and noticed the light.

The wolf followed from a distance, saw the stag stop by the road, viewed the vehicle lights and thought. "Another case of road kill?" The lights stop. "There is something wrong there. Get down." In his mind, the warning is meant for the stag too. His eyes were his only movement.

Ah yes, very nice. I'm having dinner at my favorite Italian restaurant with my mate, step daughter-in-law, her husband and 6 month old. I, pleasantly known as "Evil-Step-Dad" or Paw-Paw just sat down with a glass of red wine that I got from the bar after saying hello and partaking in the usual banter with the staff and owner. To the staff I'm Mr. T, to Ciro, it's "Hey Pisano," and then a hand shake and a hug.

I breathe in deep and let out a long relaxing sigh after a rough day. No one pays any attention. Who cares anyway? It's Friday.

The server, Suzanna, was making her usual sarcastic remarks at my expense. "You know him?" She is pointing to me and looking at D-I-L.

“Yes, unfortunately. He married my mom and we’re stuck with him.” D-I-L says with a laugh.

“You poor, poor girl,” Suzanna says. Then she gives me a poke.

“Oh yeah? Wait and see if you get a tip.” I retort.

“You should not have said that before I served you. That was not very smart.” Turning to the others, “Him, I ignore. What would you all like to start with?” She really knows what I like so there is no problem there. The drink order was made, S-I-L a beer, wife a glass of white wine, and D-I-L a coke. With my Chianti already in hand, we add some appetizers to the list.

As Suzanna left to fill our order, a petite, pregnant, very youthful appearing woman, and her mate, who is tall, with a good muscular build, and wearing a shirt with a military logo emblazoned, brushed by our booth. “Excuse me I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...”

D-I-L looks up “Eric how, are you?”

He turns around looks at D-I-L smiles takes a look at D-I-L’s husband smiles wider. The three of them know each other from school, work and parties.

Polite introductions are made. The young wife’s name is Francine. Francine and her protruding body, inserted into the booth, is directly in front of my face. I look at her and ask, “How are you doing? Would you care for a seat?” And after a deep intake of air, she said, “I’m due in a week,” and then a sigh of relief. “No thanks, we were just *leaving*.” She looked up at her husband.

I had to look at her. I had no choice from my seat. From the back, as she walked, her waddle would have been the only obvious sign that she was pregnant. It was all in front.

Since dinner had not started, a three way conversation soon began. They weren’t leaving any time soon. The conversation kept going between D-I-L, S-I-L and Eric who seemed to not pick up on Francine’s discomfort. Francine was quiet and didn’t say much of anything. I noticed she had a furrowed brow.

I sipped my wine and played with my granddaughter making her giggle. Francine’s frown changed. Children can do that.

Looking at the insignia in Eric’s shirt, attempting to be polite, “Are you in the military or Special Ops?” I asked.

“No I support our troops in any manner I can. I like to show my support. I really care.”

With that, the mention of guns and shooting came up. From food, parties, babies to guns, how odd I thought. My D-I-L mentioned to Eric, “Did you know my step-father was and still is a nationally ranked competition shooter?”

“Interesting,” Eric says, “I shoot and hunt. Eric mentioned something else about shooting and the usual concealed carry law bullshit that erupts in these conversations. He stops mid sentence and asked me, “What type of guns do you shoot? Do you carry?”

“Now, I only use a FWB 92®. It’s a 22 and it’s strictly a competition engineered weapon with a Doctor red dot. I used to shoot the full course. Now I just have the 22. And yes, I am licensed but choose not to carry, why?” I am now fully drawn into the conversation.

“Oh. You shoot a what?” He asks.

I reiterate, “An FWB 92®. I don’t hunt except when I go food shopping at Whole Foods ®. I enjoyed the bulls eye competition for a number of years. And then it became the Zen, the Art of Shooting. For that the FWB was enough. I sold my other weapons.”

The look on his face tells me he doesn’t understand and he’s not sure how to take that. Continuing I say, “I haven’t shot it in a while,” not wanting to explain some of my feelings about the sport and the environment that one has to ensconce themselves in.

Eric ignoring the looks his wife is giving him, puffs up and continues, “A friend of mine, Mike,” as if I’m supposed to know him, “he has a Walther® 22.”

I nod as if to say yes I know the make.

Eric takes it as a sign to continue. And then he begins this story. “You know Braddock Road? The area where it’s real dark?” Boy, is he excited. “The area where the trees cover the road, you know.”

“The place where the trees make an umbrella that can hide a full moon?” I ask.

“You know the place. Well... one night,” he says beaming, “one night, we, Mike the guy I mentioned, we were driving home right about there. When all of a sudden, Mike, my friend, the guy with the 22, says, ‘Stop the car. Turn the engine off, dim the lights too.’”

Eric stops and looks around to see who else is in listening range. The restaurant is empty in our section. Then he continues with a hushed tone as if to give color to his story, “I do it. I asked him, stop? Why, what’s up? Got to take a leak?”

“Mike said, ‘NO, Look, down there just off the road in the bushes, to the left. Do you see that buck over there, at the edge of the road, just staring at us? I saw the eyes reflect as we crested the hill.’”

Eric continues, "Holy shit! Would you believe, he pulls out this 22 and slowly slides out of the car. He shoots. I see the flash from the muzzle and then we hear this loud snort and the sound like air escaping. The buck jumps and takes off."

Mike is ecstatic. "Did you hear that? I never heard anything like that before, have you? That was awesome. I think I got him. Pretty good for a 22, especially a short barrel," he says.

Eric continued laughing, "We both thought that was pretty good, hit a deer with a short barrel 22 pistol. That's good freaking shooting," I said to him. "Wow, Mike let's take a look."

The wolf, well hidden in the distance is a witness to this. He takes it all in.

Eric continues, "Mike said No, tomorrow when it's light. It's a deer. There are so many of them. Not to worry. I'll get you early before church."

"Mike picks me up in the morning and we went back to where we saw the buck. The brush was thick but we could follow the tracks. About 100 yard in, in a small clearing. there he is, dried blood stains his body from his mouth; dead with a shot to the neck.

"I tell Mike, not giving it another thought except that we should be leaving, 'Nice Shot. It looks like it hit his neck and then to his lungs. That must have been the deep snort or what ever it was we heard,'"

Francine just looked at him.

Mike says, "Yeah not bad for a 22. Let's go."

I respond to Eric's story. "Yes firearms do kill. 22's are dangerous as any. The Mafia uses them for close in shots. The bullet travels all over the body destroying organs and tissue as it moves. It doesn't exit the body." Thinking but not stating, *Killed for the sport of it. You just stopped your car and let your friend shoot some deer for the fuck of it!* Inside my brain is telling me to call him on this, instead I'm quiet. I'm embarrassed by my silence. My face is hot. I can't believe what I just heard and I am doing nothing. I am saying nothing, just nodding. What is wrong with me? I think history, of people turning their backs. My wife looks at me and grabs my hand.

I turn my attention to my wine and as if he understood, Eric ended the conversation and led his wife out the front door, looking both ways for oncoming traffic. Their vehicle was parked at the far end of the lot close to the tree line.

I take a deep breath. As this tale winds down in my mind, I look through the plate glass window as this man's pregnant wife, ready to give birth in a few days, waddling to their vehicle. I wonder what if alien types just came down and took a drive by shot at some jet flying in the air for the fun of it. How would he feel if his wife and baby were on it?

It's moonless but I can still see the trees in the woods swaying in the wind from the light of the restaurant. I sigh and begin a conversation with my wife and family, and then stop. I wipe some of the marinara sauce as it trickles from the side of my mouth. Something was wrong with the cooking tonight. Dinner was not as usual. I had another glass of wine. I let them talk.

"That smell," he says. And looks toward the car. In his mind the wolf saw it in its entirety, replayed, the shooting, their voices. He watches as the deer staggers, wobbling, finally collapsing in a small clearing. He inhales quietly and deeply.

That smell. The deer staggering and left to rot. "Revenge would be just."

The consequences, he thought to himself The consequences...

He turned from the edge of the woods.

Chapter II

SOME MOLECULAR SELF-ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

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 wild animals 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 had 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 engineers's death.

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

Then the detective 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. Too many head-cases as it is, 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. The he thought, 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 earbuds. 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 --

"Damnit. 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 though 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. "No one in there."

When he looked out the window, he found 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 into his 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."

Yes we are, the thought came back.

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. Squeaking and more squeaking from all over as a matter of fact. Mice, he thought, dozens of them. It's the forest, their home but still...

It belongs to us all, came 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.

"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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