

# Screams And Whispers

By Pete Malicki

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### Cast

A young man or woman.

## Screams And Whispers

When I was five I got a budgie for Christmas. My big sister named him Couscous and I taught him to say “Hello Polly,” which wasn’t either of our names, but hey, I was five. Couscous was my best friend and I told him everything. I would dream about him saying “Hello Polly” almost every night, and though he got out and flew away after a few months, the dreams lingered for a long time.

A few years later my big sister got a kitty and I insisted she be called Quinoa. Mum and Dad convinced me no one would know how to pronounce that so we settled on Polenta instead. I didn’t like the name because I don’t like the grain but mum reminded me she was Sal’s cat and not mine and I had no right to throw a tantrum, despite the fact that Sal had named Couscous Couscous.

Polenta was gorgeous but very vocal. If she wasn’t meowing because she was hungry – which was usually at four AM when she was near my bedroom door – she was purring like it was a competitive sport. She disappeared for a week once and I swore on Santa Claus she came home at night because I could hear meowing but it turns out she’d been trapped in a neighbour’s garage and I got smacked for fibbing.

When I was ten I read *The Horse Whisperer* and fell in love with the romantic notion of talking to animals. I would sit with Polenta for an hour at a time, telepathically telling her all about my friends at primary school while she meowed incessantly. Dad told me if I was going to stare at the damned cat I could feed the damned cat. I tried to feed her polenta but she didn’t care for it.

The Davidsons moved in in the year 2000 and brought two dogs with them – a yapper and a barker. I developed an appreciation for the law this year because dad said he’d cave their heads in with a shovel if it wasn’t illegal. Shortly after they moved in I discovered I was an animal whisperer: I could hear what they were... *thinking* from within about fifty metres. When they weren’t making an actual racket, Rex and Zippo would fill my head. I’d hear a (*barks*) and (*yaps*) every morning when Mr Davidson was getting ready for work. I complained about their noise and mum said I had the hearing of a hawk. Not quite sure she got her simile right.

When a twelve-year-old discovers they have psychic powers, they don’t want to tell their family, but they want to tell someone. I told a friend, who demanded proof, so I headed around after soccer practice to speak to the family angelfish. I stared at it. It stared back with its beady eyes and fish mouth (*makes a fish face*). “Nothing,” I said. “I don’t think it has a brain. But I can hear a possum outside.” My friend asked, “What’s it saying?” “I don’t know. It doesn’t speak English. I’m not quite sure what (*makes possum noise*) means.”

Naturally, they didn’t believe me. Why would they? Why would anyone believe someone who claims to hear animal sounds in their head and how could I ever prove a chicken once told me (*makes chicken noise*)?

That year, I found it increasingly difficult to concentrate. Once I made a connection with any animal, its voice would come to me whenever I was near it. My walk to school was beginning to sound like feeding time at the zoo. Dozens of birds, cats, dogs and other creatures were chattering away in my head. An iPod on full blast was about the only thing that helped, but even that only helped so much. Imagine walking to school listening to this (*sings a couple of lines from any popular song with interjections of cat, dog and bird noises*).

I was about fifteen when I proved it and got in the local paper. Someone’s puppy had gotten itself lost and I heard it in a drain. No one really believed me but the family had already wasted

money on an animal psychic and were desperate enough to bother the fire brigade with “the rantings of an insane adolescent,” as my father was kind enough to put it.

I became a local living legend after that and my elderly neighbour Mrs Wilkshire-Smith offered me fifty dollars to find out why her beloved Tabby wasn't coming in at night. I sat down next to Tabby and petted her. She told me (*meows*), which made very little sense to someone who isn't a cat, but I translated it for Mrs W-S as: “she stays inside all day because she's scared of the neighbourhood children. You should buy them video games so they spend more time indoors.”

Oddly enough, this worked perfectly and people started throwing money at me left right and centre to fix their animals' problems. A pro jockey offered me four hundred bucks to find out why his horse had been so uncooperative over the last few months. Mum drove me to his place and I locked gazes with Princess Anne Frank. She stared at me with her deep brown, enormous evil eyes. As she looked me in the eyes, she said (*neighs evilly*). I didn't like Princess Anne Frank one bit.

“Send her to the glue factory,” I said without breaking eye contact. “This one's racing days are over.”

It will haunt me 'til the day I die that they actually did it. I was fifteen and I didn't know there'd be consequences for condemning a horse that looked at me funny. It might have been the guilt they could sense in me or some weird sixth sense thing but all of a sudden animals hated me. Birds would swoop me wherever I went, screeching (*angry bird noises*) as I hurried by. My life was a non-stop symphony of barking dogs. Cats yowled and scratched me and I always seemed to have ants crawling into my shoes and biting my ankles. I'd tried to play the horse whisperer and now my head was filled with screams – screams of rage and hate and disgust.

It was hell. I didn't sleep for a month. I tried to keep it together but I couldn't get along with anyone anymore and Mum ended up taking me out of school. She took me to the doctors. The ones near the vet. Animals' voices were filling my head – roosters (*crows*), mice (*squeaks*), snakes (*hisses*), pigs (*squeals*), lions (*roars*), hyenas (*laughs hysterically then continues with a few other animal noises – whatever the actor can manage!*).

It was intolerable. I tore piles and piles of medical records off the shelves, screaming and covering my ears to drown out the noises. These animals were going to kill me for what I did to Princess Anne Frank. I murdered her! They were going to avenge her. I was going to die! They were going to get me and I had to get the hell out of there, fast. I ran full bolt for the door.

They didn't institutionalise me but I came to in a hospital after I blacked out. The doctor had read about me in the papers and more or less had the neuroleptics on standby. I was better after the whole episode. I don't hear the voices of nearby creatures anymore – not when I'm awake at least.

You know, I don't believe I'm the schizophrenic they're treating me as. The drugs affect certain neural pathways and it's just coincidence that they shut out the whispering. How'd I find that puppy in that drain? And explain why I got like twenty times the national bee-sting average last June. Either way, it's better having my head free from anything else's thoughts. There's enough going on in my human brain. Oh, one sec.

*Takes phone out and answers it.*

Hello? (*covers phone*) It's Gary.

*Uncovers phone. Barks. Laughs. Barks some more. Walks off stage making animal noises and laughing.*