

Wounded Animal Songbook

by David Burton

Part 1: The Ballad of Senator Sebastian Van Something-or-Other

My friend Dell suffers from Capgras Delusion. He thinks everyone has been replaced by a double.

“That ain't Joe Cocker, man,” Dell barks, “That's Scotch and Apple Juice. I seen him at The Emerald Lounge after work sometimes. No one knew his name; he'd sit in the corner by the hat rack and drink scotch and apple juice and watch the people coming in. His wallet fell open on the floor one time and I saw a picture of his wife. She had no arms at all, just big eyes, like an insect that's been hit with a rolled up magazine but hasn't died yet. He said her name was Maria.”

We're sitting on the shag carpet in Dell's trailer drinking grape sodas and watching Channel 3. Dell reaches over and grabs a pen and his memo pad and writes JOE COCKER on the list in big letters and underlines it twice.

“How do they make him do it?” I ask.

“Implants in the neck-- electrodes or tiny bombs. If he does anything suspicious they'll kill him by remote control. I saw it happen before, after a politician from Maine said that maybe the war wasn't right. They replaced him with an almost exact double, except his head was about 7/8ths the size. I only recognized him because he had tried to sell me insurance the week before. He had knocked on my door in an old brown suit and had some papers coming out the sides of his briefcase. I told him I didn't have nothing worth insuring and he said he was thirsty for coffee and I said I didn't have none left. He joked that maybe I should have insured it.

The next time I saw him was on a TV war hearing. His moustache was gone and he was called Senator Sebastian Van Something-or-other. They put a big map with cartoon troops on an overhead projector and stuck a dry-erase marker in his hand and the room got quiet, like they were waiting for him to do something. After about thirty seconds of silence he started crying. Then there was a little sound, like a firework being thrown into the sea, and red flowers started blooming in his eyes. A stroke, they said. Well, I ain't never heard a stroke before."

The door in Dell's place is swinging open with the breeze and I go and stand by it and look out at the endless July sky and the patches of connecting yards with their rusty, falling-down chain link fences. I raise the glass of Pepsi up to my eyes and the summer sun filters through it, tinting the world a wavy red, and I think about the insurance man's last moments spent in that quiet room. Two black girls with ponytails and matching bathing suits are laughing and roller skating down the drive with a terrier on a leash. The terrier is wearing pink plastic sunglasses, struggling not to fall behind them. The breeze feels hot like smoke. Dell's eyes are still glued to the TV, watching Scotch and Apple Juice writhe about on his feet, moaning 'Love Lifts Us Up Where We Belong' with his eyes clamped shut.

"He's wearing that turtleneck because he has a tiny birthmark in the shape of a sickle," Dell says, "They probably could have used make-up but it could have come off when he sweated. Sweated? Is that a word? It don't sound right. Can you imagine Joe Cocker wearing a fucking wool turtleneck? They're not even trying anymore, it's embarrassing. Somebody once told me I look like John Goodman. If that prick ever takes a stand on anything and they need to replace him, I'm getting plastic surgery. I ain't gonna live in Beverley Hills and wear a miner's helmet to see through the smog. I ain't gonna go to those earthquake survivor's support groups and have people leave mascara stains on my shoulder."

Outside the terrier is now straining at the end of his leash and a mailman's dropped his sack and is pushing at the air in front of the dog's face with both his hands. He's making a noise

under his breath, like 'aahheeenooooonooo'. His pants have been cut into grey shorts with little navy stripes running up the sides and he's sunburnt. His forehead's a shiny apple. The air smells of motor oil.

"What about his wife, Maria?" I ask, "She has no arms. Who will look after her?"

"Maria must be dead by now," Dell replies, lighting a cigarette. "They came in the middle of the night; they took her from bed and carried her outside; she looked at the stars; she didn't cry..."

I turn back to the door and see that everyone's gone: The girls on roller skates, the terrier in the plastic glasses, the sunburnt mailman. All that's left is a big sack of letters spilling on to the lawn.

"The world's just a sad place," Dell says.

Part 2: Everybody Seems to be Crying a Lot These Days

I wanted to be a veterinarian when I was a kid but I wasn't bright enough, or rather I was usually trying to find a golden whistle in "The Legend of Zelda" game when I should have been in biology, but back then I couldn't stand seeing a mouse splayed open; I hated how its legs were pinned. So when I flunked out I decided to be a crime scene cleaner, although I had never been very careful. I showed up on the first day with my rags and bucket and ammonia and ducked under the police tape and walked right through a puddle of blood. I left red footprints all over the living room rug, a rug that the widower started screaming was "Old and Asian!" I tried to leave but the widower followed my footprints all the way down the street, until they were just a barely visible faint pink. He opened the door of the restaurant men's room where I was hiding and called me a bastard through the stall door. There were tears coming down his cheeks. He took a handkerchief and got on his knees and wiped down the trail of footprints all the way back to his house. When I got into the van I saw that he had written 'BASTARD' in the windshield dust.

Now I have a job that's sort of like both the others combined. I tell people I'm a middleman because that sounds professional, and it's also the truth. But for a while, after that Robert Redford movie came out, I would tell people that I was a pet whisperer because I thought it sounded romantic. I even ordered business cards printed with a picture of me that I had taken professionally at the mall. I wore my lucky black vest; there was a golden light in my hair. I had it set next to cartoon of a smiling cat with a halo. The cards read 'Bill Burford: Pet Whisperer', but the girls were always too sad to find it romantic, and now it's back to middleman.

I just had an easy job, a pick-up of a terrier that had gotten caught on its leash and was half-strangled to death. The mother folded three \$10 bills into my palm and I told the two sisters that I was taking Pansy to a farm where she could get better and then they roller-skated away, holding hands, crying. The dog was barely alive, its eyes had gone milky but its tail wagged slowly, back and forth. She was a goner even before I took her. 'Listen,' I told the woman, 'I know it's hard to watch something you love die, you're not weak because you can't.' She frowned and said 'Yeah, well, thanks for coming,' and stared at the floor until I eventually let myself out of the trailer.

When I get into the car I put Pansy in the passenger's seat and drive off towards Dr. Maynard. I say Dr. Maynard instead of Dr. Maynard's because that would imply he had an office, which he doesn't, which is why he's the cheapest vet in Missouri. He carries anaesthetic and a lunch of cheese sandwiches in a backpack, and wheels around a red wagon that usually holds three or four small, hand-made pine boxes lined with velvet. His wife was hit and killed by a taxi at a crosswalk last year and now he sits there in a lawn chair with a stopwatch and a stack of notebooks, keeping his eyes on the red light, recording the intervals between changes, building an imaginary case against God. 'She was fast,' he once told me, 'She

was a jogger. This shouldn't have happened.' He was crying when he said that. Everybody seems to be crying a lot these days. I had put my arm on his shoulder, 'I understand how hard it is, you're not weak for feeling this way.' 'Fuck you,' he said.

On the way to Dr. Maynard my cell phone vibrates. I used to have the whistling part from The Scorpion's 'Winds of Change' as my ring tone because I thought it was romantic, but it rang in the library once and security dragged me away. They hauled me into an archive filled with dusty micro-fiche machines and questioned me for two days. A man in a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches asked if I was German, then burnt me with a corn cob pipe. The ring tone was removed and now I'm on probation, so I always have to keep it on vibrate. I can't go into libraries again, they'd know me by the scar. It's Chuck from the office.

"Hey Chuck, what's shaking?"

"You have to get over to Fifth Street now. Some chickens at The Genetic Enhancement for Your Enjoyment Farm have gotten over an electric fence and hot-wired a car. They've driven it to the Stop & Shop, they're ripping the place apart."

"They can drive?"

"Not well. They just clipped some girl in the parking lot."

"Yeah, alright," I mutter, hanging up. Chickens are the worst. Even with all the steroids and growth hormones and bio-engineering cows are too stupid to really hurt anybody, they just wander around looking in people's second story windows, and pigs are too nice, they like lying in the parks in pairs at sunset, but chickens tear each other's eyes out, they rip the roofs off grain silos, they move at night in roving packs. Scientists say that eventually their wings will evolve to the point where they can fly and carry away medium-sized

children, but it'll probably be at least two months before that happens. Chickens are the worst things next to lobsters.

The Stop & Shop is a Stop & Shop Express, so it's on the wrong side of town, the east side of town. The only people who live here are poor pensioners in shotgun shacks and fast food workers living in the shadow of a collapsing dam. The Animal Fighting Force won't come near this place and the police have specially made maps that end a mile west. I pull into the parking lot and see a group of roosters squawking and trying to overturn an '87 Pontiac Bonneville that's caught fire. They're pouring whiskey down their throats. They're weeping over a bag of economy sized frozen breast fillets. I pat Pansy on the head and call the office.

"It doesn't look too bad here," I say.

"Go to hell," Chuck says.

Part 3: The Case of the Disappearing Footprints

I tell Alex to put her hands on my chest. She asks why. Just do it, I tell her. Your heart is fast, she says. Yes, I answer, but I'm not going to die, it's been that way since I was a child. The big window next to the bed is open to the moon and the glow from the streetlamp is pouring through with the night wind and there are doves rustling in the curtains. Alex is playing her old 78 records. She's made an adaptor for them from cardboard so now the records wobble and never sound quite right, but they don't sell the real adaptors anymore. She's had to tape a penny on the needle to keep it down. Who is this, I ask. She says it's Jobim. The song floats up to fill the room: "*Se voce disser que eu desafino amor...*" I can't understand Portuguese, I tell her. I ask why they haven't invented some kind of device with a microphone that translates English into

other languages, so we could go to Gonzaga Bay and order soft shelled crab stuffed with maize and drink brandy at a restaurant by the sea, but she doesn't know why. You couldn't sing through it anyway, she says. Nonsense, I tell her, and then sing like a robot. I think I'll win the Eurovision contest this year, I say, but she doesn't laugh. I tell her that last night I dreamt that we were great detectives, so great that other detectives came to us when they were at a dead end. Our case revolved around another agency that had a logo with a silhouette of footprints etched on the frosted glass of their office door. Overnight the footprints disappeared, as if they had belonged to a ghost who stood up and walked away. You were wearing a white trench coat; I was carrying an antique spyglass. Are you still shaken up, I ask. A little, she answers. I didn't even know chickens could drive, I say. They can't, she says, that's why they hit me. While I was picking up my bags off the ground I saw this poor dog limp out of the passenger's window of a car. Somehow it hobbled across the road, in between all the traffic, and disappeared into a field. Then I watched as the tops of the sunflowers started to bend, very slowly at first, but then quicker, until they looked like a line of yellow dominos falling in the dusk. The dog must have been running; it was stronger than it looked. She rolls onto her back and lifts her feet above her head and little crimson domes of blood rise through her torn stockings like Martian villages. Well, I say, we should walk back to get the car soon. Let's take a trip; we can drive through the night to New England with all the windows down. They have dirt roads with covered bridges there. They have places that make wine. We can swim in glacier holes and the sun will dry our clothes. I'll phone you in sick to work. Will the old Bonneville make it that far, she asks. I tell her it's never had any problems. OK, she says, that'll be nice, and then she says that the security cameras started talking to her again. I ask what they said. Well, at first it was just normal, she says, the police were being ordered to an alley where an armless woman in dark glasses and a wig was hiding behind a dumpster. But then I was at the ATM pulling out money and a man's voice told me I couldn't afford to withdraw \$40. I took out

my memo pad and a black marker and wrote 'IT'S FOR FOOD' on a piece of paper and held it up to the camera. He said *'Ok, but just food. You don't need nothing else, you can make soap from leftover candle wax.'* When I went into the Stop & Shop I held a red bell pepper up to my eyes, just slowly spinning it in my hand, looking at it shine under the fluorescents, and the voice said *'That ain't a good pepper, it's got a soft spot on it. Get an organic one.'* I wrote 'PLEASE LEAVE ME ALONE. THIS HAS BEEN GOING ON TOO LONG. WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS TO ME?' *'I'm lonely,'* it said, *'I'm all alone. It's dark here.'* I tell her we should leave the country. It wouldn't matter, she says, there are cameras everywhere, he could follow us around the world without leaving the room beneath the Government Center. When I was in the frozen food aisle he read me poetry with no context, as if he were reading parts of love letters he'd found on the street. *'I miss you in Angola,'* he said. *'The moon smells of gunpowder.'* *'Your eyes remind me of finding money on the ground.'* I scrawled 'YOU DIDN'T WRITE THOSE THINGS.' 'No,' he said. 'WELL WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO SAY?' There was a pause. Then the camera whispered *'The world's just a sad place.'* So I took my memo pad and ripped out 5 sheets and then held them up one by one.

'YES.

BUT IT'S ALSO

A

BEAUTIFUL

ONE.'

