

War

by Jack Swenson

Up, down, sideways. My emotions are all over the place after the terrorist attack. First I'm angry, then depressed, then angry again—this time at something else. One day I'm mad at the terrorists, the next at the FAA, then at our foreign policy, and finally at myself for second-guessing.

Is patriotism the last refuge of scoundrels? Or is it hindsight?

My friend Bert and I argue each morning on our daily walks. Nuke 'em, Leonard says. No more land wars in countries where we don't belong. Bert, a Vietnam vet, is suspicious of government policy.

I share his skepticism about our leadership until I read an article I find on the Internet about the major players in our state department and their preparations for a response to the attack.

They seem to know what they are doing, I tell Bert, and I sketch out an outline of what I have read. Bert is unimpressed. The article comforts me, though. It's nice to know we have a plan.

I ask my wife what she thinks of all this, and she replies that she is in denial.

I tell my wife to go shopping. Shop 'til you drop, I say. It's patriotic. She goes shopping for things we need. Groceries. I tell her to look for flags, and she does, but she can't find any.

We borrow a flag from a neighbor. It's sitting on top of the TV in the den. We haven't figured out where to display it yet. One of our neighbors has spray-painted God Bless America in red, white, and blue on his garage door. The other neighbors are abuzz because very faintly you can see other words underneath. Go Home something. The first two words are all you can read.

Of course the psychiatrists and counselors are thick as flies on the talk shows, talking about what we can do with our anger, but I think instead we should be talking about what we can *do*.

What can we do? I send money to the Red Cross and other relief agencies, and vow not to join the mental masturbators who are critical of our country's past policy mistakes. What's done is done.

After that, I draw a blank. What else can I do? Remember, maybe. Remember what it was like during the cold war. Remember what it was like after Pearl Harbor. The Cold War lasted for forty-five years. After Pearl Harbor, it was six months before there was any good news. Day after day we heard on the radio and read in the newspaper how the U.S. was getting its ass kicked. It wasn't until the battle of Midway that we had anything to cheer about.

Meanwhile, my wife and I get tipsy, figuratively speaking. We grow giddy. We talk about mobilizing the cats in the new war on terrorism. I go outside one morning, and the raccoons have torn up the grass in our front lawn. I claim it was the work of terrorists. We begin assigning each of our animals a job. Simba, an antisocial Maine Coon who lives in our garage at night and roams the property outside by day, is given the title of Minister of Homeland Security. Frank, our smartest cat, is named the new Director of the CIA. (I figure that replacing the old one is no great loss.) Mouse and Turtle, who spend hours on our back porch watching the birds, are made air raid wardens. Pee Wee is put in charge of rounding up terrorist flies and moths. Pee Wee, an adolescent gray tabby, relishes his job. He eats what he catches. Barbaric? Yes, but fight fire with fire.

Spot wants to join Simba in securing the perimeter of our property, but he proves to be unqualified. A muscular tom with the mottled black and white coloring of a Holstein cow, Spot tangles with a stray, a red tabby, whom because of the red hair Spot mistakes for a member of the IRA, and Spot gets his clock cleaned. I tell Spot that he has no sense of history. Don't fight old battles, I say. Spot crawls up into my lap, and when I stroke his head, he purrs.

All of our cats, all nine of them, seem to be needy these days. Spot had never been a lap cat before. And now, when one of them flops on the carpet, begging for attention, two or three more will appear out of nowhere, circling close as we kneel down to administer pats and scratches.

Or perhaps it isn't the cats' need but an instinctive recognition of our need that explains the change in behavior. Something is wrong

in their world, and they are dealing with it the best way that they can, by radiating a kind of fuzzy love.

