

OUTCASTS

by Rick Marcou

Ol' Jerrol sat on his porch, the rocking of his rickety old chair only happening when his body involuntarily moved. His gaze was focused on the floorboards, one in particular. The paint was chipped – well, it was chipped on all of them, the dirty grayish color that seemed to be the base was just what white looked like after 30 some-odd years. Kinda like the house in general, untouched, unchanged, except for old and broken and dusty everywhere. That might describe Ol' Jerrol too. But he didn't much care, suited him fine, he wasn't goin' nowhere, just like this house. He just kept staring at this piece of wood, pondering something. It was buckled, with a rusted nail sticking up and out a bit then bent back down. Jerrol couldn't remember if he was the one that hammered it down, rather than pulling it up and driving in a new nail. If he could find a new nail in his beat up ol' shed. But that's the past, he thought, no use worryin' 'bout it now. Wasn't goin' nowhere. The board or him. And no one was comin', not all the way out here. Not to see him. Nobody would want to see him if they didn't have to.

He awoke with a shake, kicking his leg out and causing the rocker to swing back and almost throw him off. "Whoa Aah" he uttered as he came to, realizing he just woke up and thinking something touched his leg. At the same time a dog yelped, and he saw a black-brown mangy-looking mutt run off the porch and then turn and look back at him.

"Whachu doin' here? Git, git you!"

The dog just angled his head slightly to the left, his eyes fixed on Jerrol, but with no animosity, just something more like curiosity, maybe some pleading mixed in that expression somewhere.

"Wha, whadya want? I got nuthin' fer ya. No food here. Git!" Jerrol waived his right arm a couple times as he said it, hoping it would scare the dog. Make him move on. But it would take more than that to scare this dog. Bigger men, with big sticks and double barrel shotguns, that was what usually yelled at him. And hit him. No, he wasn't budging.

The dog moaned a couple times, and then settled down at the spot. His head rested down on his forelegs, two skinny black limbs with some brown markings on each. His eyes stayed on Jerrol, his eyebrows seemingly heavy and wanting to close down over his eyes but the dog insisting on keeping them open, looking up.

As the remnants of the sun started to disappear over the trees off to the left, Jerrol leaned forward and put his weight on his forearms to allow him to push himself out of the rocker without falling. He was pretty good at it now, after so many years of doing it, but not without an occasional miss sending him reeling, sometimes all the way off the porch and down the one step to the dirt. He headed into his house, the wooden screen door slamming shut. The dog got up, its old bones also taking their time to complete the act, and slowly made his way back up onto the porch. He looked through the screen, seeing the old man moving about, and set down there. A soft moan came from deep inside, just barely audible.

Jerrol heated up a can of baked beans, and fried and cut up an old hot dog from the fridge to throw in there. He carried his bowl to the living room to set down in his easy chair, only then seeing the dog looking at him though the screen door.

"You still here? Told you to git. Now you git," he barked at the dog, raising his voice at the last few words as he moved closer to him. The dog didn't move, just leaned his head to the left again and gave the curious look.

"Yer not gonna leave, are ya? Well, I guess I can give you some of this. You hold on you mutt." And he headed back to the kitchen, scooping a little of his feast into a small bowl. He carried the bowl to the door, and started to open it. The dog backed up with an excited look on his face, sensing the bowl was for him. Jerrol set it down on the porch, and the dog immediately came and started eating. The food was gone in about ten seconds.

"Take yer time doggie. That's fine eatin' there, no need to rush it."

The dog looked at him with the curious expression again. Jerrol grabbed the bowl and went back in, filled it with water and came back out. This took the dog about thirty seconds to lap it all up.

"Yer a hungry one, aren't ya? You been fed at all lately? Who you belong to?" The dog returned to his curious expression.

Cletus and Duane Jr. each had their heads inside the hood of the Dodge Dart, risky since the lime green hood resting above them was a replacement installed by Duane Jr., and everyone who knew Duane Jr. knew he couldn't be trusted to do that kind of thing right. Cletus was the brains of this operation, if any were ever needed. 10 months younger, but 3 times smarter. That just means that if Cletus managed to get a 60 on a test back in high school, which would be a huge stretch, Duane Jr. probably got a 20 on that test the year before. Also maybe a stretch. They both walked across that stage and got handed diplomas, to this day nobody really knows how. Figure the school system just got tired of them both.

Now in their 20's, and seeing themselves as hot rod racin' guys, they spent most of their days working on this car. This 1970 Dodge Dart. Probably should call it a rainbow Dart given the variety of colors it had, or Frankenstein given the random spare parts from who knows where. But they managed to soup up the engine, and it was fast. When they could get it started.

They pulled their heads out of the engine block, and both saw the mangy mutt setting right there next to them. Duane Jr.'s first reaction was to kick at him. The dog was quick, but still took a glancing blow off its hind quarter, letting out a yelp as it darted away from the Dart.

"Git outta here, you mutt," Duane Jr. added, for emphasis. Cletus just laughed, unclear if it was at the dog or at Duane Jr. and his awkward kicking form. The dog stayed, though, and gave a bit of a growl as Duane Jr. took a couple steps closer.

"I dunno Junnuh, you might wanna watch out, he seems like a mean sumbitch, might give you rabies."

"Not before I give him some whupass. Git over here dog," and he tried to launch another right kick, missing badly as the dog again darted back. Duane Jr. managed to right himself before nearly falling over. Cletus couldn't contain his laugh again.

"All right, time to end this." And Duane Jr. headed to the back door of the car, reaching in and grabbing out his shotgun.

"Jeez, Junnuh, you gonna shoot 'em?"

"Maybe. Gonna smack 'em first. Knock his ass out. Then shoot 'em if he tries to bite me."

Duane Jr. again approached the dog, this time holding the gun by the barrel, over his right shoulder. The dog kept his eyes on Duane Jr., more specifically on the gun. As it started its arc down

from on high the dog took off, headed away down the road, while Duane Jr. completed the swing and miss, much to the amusement of Cletus.

It was Cletus' turn to drive, they were heading out to the old abandoned airstrip where they could get the car up to top speed and still have plenty of room to slow it down. The only problem with this test track was the amount of abandoned machinery piled along the edges of the strip. Over the years this had become a dumping ground, where folks would come and drop anything from old stills to lawn mowers to cars. On the positive side it's where Cletus found some parts for the Dart, but it also meant that they had to be careful to keep a tight line because the equipment was everywhere.

Cletus pulled to the end of the strip and turned it around. "OK Duane give me the countdown." Duane Jr. started off, from 5 since 10 might have been a problem for him. "Five, four, three, two, one, GO!"

With that Cletus let off on the clutch and floored it, quickly working the gears all the way to fourth as the car reached 80, then 90, then finally 95. "Yeehaw" Duane Jr. yelled, "fuck yeah. Go baby."

All of a sudden Cletus saw something come into the road from behind a piece of machinery on the right. Not knowing what it was, he turned the wheel to the left, avoiding the creature but causing the wheels to skid a bit. He quickly tried to correct to the right, but the car jerked and he had to steer back left. He slammed the brakes but ended up in a full skid, across the grass and headed directly into a huge old John Deere tractor. The car slammed into one of its massive back tires, which due to being flat was basically a rubber-covered hunk of metal. The front end of the Dart was crushed in. The car spun a little to its right mashing the passenger side against the side of the tractor. Cletus and Duane Jr. both flopped forward into the dashboard and windshield on initial impact, then got splayed on the front seat and floorboard on the side hit, all of which happens when you don't have enough brains to bother putting a seatbelt on.

"Godammit!" Duane Jr. yelled, "that fuckin' dog."

"Is that what it was?" Cletus asked. "I saw somethin', wasn't sure, thought it might have been a kid."

"No, man, wudn't no kid. It was that same old mutt. Dammit, shoulda killed it when I could."

They made their way out of the car to assess the damage. They had some bumps and bruises, nothing compared to the car.

"That fucker is dead. Dead!" Duane Jr. had a fierce look on his face.

"Well, there he is," Cletus pointed over to their left, "Have at 'em."

Duane Jr. opened up the driver-side back door, about the only part of the car not crushed or dented. He reached in, grabbed out the shotgun and slammed the door. Muttered "fucker" and then ran off.

"Go git 'em Junnuh! Yeee boy!" Cletus cheered, the chaw dripping out the left side of his mouth. Duane Jr. ran in his distinct awkward way, which favored his right leg. Looked like a 24-year-old version of the 12-year-old Duane Jr., who couldn't play sports let alone outrun the old lady shopkeeper he had tried stealing a pack of gum from. But here he was, intent as hell. The dog was up ahead, near the tree line, watching. Duane Jr. slowed, raised up the gun, steadied his aim, and fired. The explosive pop of the shotgun caused the dog to shake a bit, but the sound of the 12-gauge

shell hitting the pine tree flush in the center, four feet to the left of the dog, caused him to yelp and dart to his left. He stared back at the man with the gun, who again started running towards him. "You go boy, git 'em!" Cletus again rooting on his brother. "Kill that fucker!" He spit out a juicy wad, then turned to his wreck of a car.

Duane Jr. headed into the trees, at the spot where the dog had gone in moments before. He could see the mutt up ahead, maybe 40 yards, but no clear shot with all the trees and the dog veering left and right around 'em. After about two minutes of running Duane Jr. was slowing down, his tank nearly empty. The dog had stopped and was looking back. Duane Jr. stopped and aimed, but again was probably a few feet left, though no sound to indicate where the shell ended up. But it was enough to send the dog off again. Duane Jr. followed. After about 80 more yards Duane Jr. stopped and stared. The dog was about 30 yards ahead, still running, now across a scrub grass field beyond the trees. But Duane Jr. was focused on the old wooden sign hung at eye level on the tree in front of him, two rusted nails still somehow keeping it in place. It read 'Private Property, Trespassers Will Be Shot'. Duane Jr. knew this was true. This was Ol' Jerrol's place. He turned and headed back, dejected, invisible tail between his legs.

"Thank you sir. Have a nice day."

The old bearded man grumbled a nod, grabbed the bag of food and headed out the door. Dropped it into the front passenger seat, and closed the rusted door with a sound that was painful to hear, like bending metal against its will. He shuffled over to the driver's side, took a look back at the store and the woman who was looking out at him, then got in and drove off.

"Was that that guy Jerrol?" asked Betty Muldoon, walking over to the shopkeeper.

"Yep, that was him." Virginia the shopkeeper held a flat look out the window, but her voice gave away a sound of frustration, maybe something more. "Comes in every few weeks, gets the same stuff and leaves, doesn't say a word."

"What does he get," nosy Betty asked. Couldn't help herself.

"Baked beans, hot dogs, spaghetti, canned peaches, that's pretty much it."

"Hmm." Betty seemed to want to say more, Virginia could see it in her face as she turned to her.

"What?" she asked.

"Is it true what they say about him? That he shot all those people?"

"What exactly did you here?"

"That he shot and killed like 4 men on his property. But that his family got killed too. Then he shot a sheriff once."

"Sort of," Virginia offered. "Some guys tried to rob his house, thinkin' it was empty, but his wife and son were there. Jerrol was out huntin'. He came back and found them there, shot all four of them dead on the spot, don't think any of them even got a shot off. But they already killed his wife and son."

"Oh, that's awful. Is that why he's so mean and nasty?"

"Maybe. But he was kinda mean and nasty before that too."

"What about the sheriff he shot?"

"Wasn't a sheriff. An off-duty deputy came onto his property to hunt, Jerrol saw him and told him to get out, private property. There are signs all over there, always have been probably all the way back to Jerrol's ancestors. But the deputy supposedly raised up his gun and aimed it at Jerrol,

and even got a shot off before Jerrol fired a shot into the deputy's skull. Deputy missed 'em though. Sheriff couldn't do anything because it was private property, and Jerrol said it was self-defense. Sheriff didn't believe the deputy fired first, couldn't find a shell casing or anything, figured the gun was warm because he was huntin'. But Jerrol didn't get charged. And so yeah, he's a mean cuss now, but I guess he has his reasons. Doesn't talk to no one, and no one talks to him if they don't have to."

"Hmm," Betty uttered again.

Ol' Jerrol leaned back in his rocker, looking out at the pine trees in his front yard. Thinkin' how much they'd grown since he was a young'un. And they were big then, he seemed to remember. Used to climb on 'em. His pappy and grandpappy probably sat here on this porch and looked at those same trees, thinking how big they were back then. But he'll be the last one to sit here and look at 'em, that much he knew. He closed his eyes, a slight wince crossed both. He reached his left hand down and gave the dog a soft pat, then rubbed his hand along the dog's neck and back. The dog kept his head down on his forelegs, his eyes struggling to stay open, but a soft moan escaped his mouth.