

Durante's Window of Opportunity

Aves, raised under the influence of Tull and Zappa, always drove with her windows down in the summer, her long, grey hair flipping belligerently around her neck, so it was easy for the pelican to swoop in and occupy the passenger seat in her clumsy brown LeBaron. She was impressed with his technique, how he darkened the window with his wingspan, tucking in tight at the last second for a perfect on point landing. With a shuffle of his webbed feet and their tiny taloned toes, he faced forward, resting his interminable peak on the dash as lightly as two fingers on a Ouija board planchette.

"Hello there," she said, slowing her vehicle from eighty miles per hour to a legal sixty-five. "Do I know you?" The bird ignored her, staring as straight ahead as his side aligned eyes allowed. His chest heaved, respirations harsh. Aves didn't know what was normal for pelicans, she knew only of human breaths, but it was obvious this shotgun riding creature was under stress. She looked for a place to pull over, but the traffic out of Sioux City was brutal. She kept driving north.

"It's not that I have anything against your kind, I just wasn't expecting company. I don't have any extra room, surely you can see that." She started to wave her hand over her automotive domain, the boxes and bags that filled her backseat, the jackets, lab coats and sweaters swaying from a rickety rod suspended between the coat hooks above her back doors, but she aborted the movement, envisioning a frenzied flapping response. The floor of the passenger seat was equally full, cradling her overnight bag and the cooler equipped with bottled water, fruit, cheese, and a fifth of Redbreast whiskey. She trusted the bird would not feel inclined to relieve itself on her provisions.

"What are you doing here anyway? Iowa is not exactly known for its coastal ambiance. "Her question went unanswered. She watched the road intermittently, concentrating on the bird squatting across her leather seats. His breathing had slowed and quieted. His shoulders – do pelicans even have shoulders? – drooped, silver and white feathers puddling on the seat beneath him. Eyeing an upcoming

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rest area, Aves headed towards the truck section, parking her car between two idling semis. She no longer hitchhiked, her phlebotomist jobs kept her in gas money, but she felt safer hidden between a couple of 18 wheelers, the diesel fumes a comfort. She had not planned on stopping so soon as the drive between her home in Correctionville and her parents cabin in Lead, SD was barely eight hours, she wouldn't need fuel for some time. What she needed, was distance.

Reluctantly, she got out of her car and walked around the back of it, since the front was facing the highway. She peered inside the passenger window, calculating the weight of the pelican. He didn't look that heavy, no more than a large Thanksgiving turkey. Of course a turkey was deadweight. She imagined lifting the pelican out and driving away. She could leave him alone on the hot asphalt, miles away from wherever he had come from, no worse off than he was before he dropped in, uninvited. No harm no foul, she rationalized. Opening the car door slowly, she stepped back and waited, giving him the chance to leave on his own, but he remained grounded as her copilot. Using the good body techniques ingrained in her, bending her knees and not her back, she scooped her arms under its plumage. He was warm against her forearms, but made no noise, no moves. With her face up close to his body, she noticed the large fishhook embedded in his upper beak, the long nylon tail of fishing line weaving in and out of his mouth, unnaturally suturing his beak shut. It was neglectful of her not to have noticed the birds' dilemma earlier.

Pulling her arms away, she carefully pushed her uninvited copilot farther back in the seat and opened up her glove box. Routing beneath napkins, salt packets, several tubes of lip balm, a canister of pepper spray, and a three-year-old pack of camels – one vice conquered – she finally unearthed a pair of scissors. Starting low, moving deliberately, Aves systematically clipped away the restraints, freeing the pelican's beak. "I'll have to leave the hook for now, I don't have the right tools, but when we get to the next town will find a vet. Can you wait a little longer?"

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He wanted fish. Wet cold slippery slide down his gullet in one swoop head toss fish. He wanted water. He wanted lots of water. He smelled her humanness the second he mistook the car for a boat. He wanted to fly away, but he was tired and he couldn't get his mouth open. He could never get his mouth open. He could not get fish in his mouth. He could not get water in his mouth. He couldn't get the hard thing out of his mouth but he did get a searing burn ripping through his head whenever he moved his beak so he looked straight ahead with a sideways approach and stopped moving his beak two weeks ago. He wanted to get away from the human smell.

"Good, we have an understanding. You'll wait until we find a vet. But now you need fluids, you're dehydrated." She reached in front of the pelican again, opened her cooler on the floor and pulled out two bottles of water. Dumping all her salt packets into them, she pressed one of the bottles against his beak, trying to get him to open his mouth, but it stayed shut. Slipping her index finger in the corner, she opened his beak it just enough to pour in the water, filling his pendulous pouch only one quarter of the way. "You're free, you can swallow now," she said, but the pelican remained rigid. "You're afraid aren't you? You're afraid if you try something different it will hurt." Slowly, she lifted up his beak, tilting his head back. The water sluiced down his throat.

"That's quite a snoz you've got there Durante." Now she had done it. She named him. Her. It. The bird. She had named the bird who interrupted her drive, her time alone in the car to get her story together, before arriving in Lead, the groin of America. She needed every bit of the road time to put miles between her and the man who lived to hurt her, every second to build her strength to deal with the parents who wanted her to leave him, a decade ago. It's hard to leave something once it has a name.

She and her passenger arrived in Sioux Falls at 8:15 PM. She had no cell phone by choice and could not find a pay phone. She did find a bait shop and a pimply headed cashier who let her use his

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smart phone for five dollars , but all she got were answering services who politely informed her that veterinarians only made emergency calls to people they knew.

"I need some fish," she told the teenager handing back the phone.

"We don't have fish, we only have worms." "I

smell fish," Aves said.

"Those are my fish" he said, nodding towards the back. "I caught them today, just some tiny bluegills"

"I'll take them."

He charged her twenty dollars for the four appetizer-sized fish and when he turned away to flip the store's open sign to closed, she grabbed a handful of candy bars by the cash register and shoved them into her shoulder bag. Again, Durante would not open his beak. Taking her scissors, she cut up the bluegills, piling their slick innards and fins onto several napkins. Piece by piece she pushed them through the corner opening of Durante's beak, directing it towards the sky, encouraging him to swallow.

She drove west on I-90 through the night, passing the signs for the Corn Palace in Mitchell and getting gas in Murdo. She resisted the urge to stop at Wall Drug, billboards bragging of hot coffee and the world's best cinnamon rolls, even visitors from France said so, arriving in Rapid City as the sun washed over the Badlands behind her. She found a gas station with a pay phone and a ten-year-old phone book. She parked in front of Dr. Whitman's office and waited until a round woman wearing scrubs with dancing puppy dogs and kittens, arrived to unlock the door.

"We need some help here," Aves said, placing Durante up on the counter in front of the receptionist.

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"Cash or credit?" asked the woman without looking up, moving her fingers across a computer keyboard.

Aves chose cash. Cash didn't leave a trail. No crumbs in the forest. The back door of the veterinary office opened and an elderly man with an Andy Griffith smile entered, hanging his Stetson on a mounted Jackalope horn.

"Well, we don't see many like him around these parts" the vet said, "Is he yours?"

"No, Avis said, we just met last night." She followed the Dr. into his exam room, placing Durante on the stainless steel exam table. He remained still even as the vet clipped off the end of the fish hook with a wire cutter, making it flush with Durante's beak. He remained expressionless as the vet reached inside his mouth, and pulled out the curved portion of the barbed hook. He remained mute and uncomplaining when the vet flushed the gaping wound with Betadine, suctioning the reddish brown fluid from the birds pouch. He did not flinch when the sharp needle filled with antibiotics was driven into the remaining flesh of his thigh.

"I'm sorry the vet said, but your friend here is in pretty bad shape, I'm not sure he's going to make it."

"We're almost home," Avis said, "we'll survive."