



prologue

Evil was about to happen, in the gloomy hours of the night. A shape, made amorphous by the dark, moved slowly through twisted hallways and climbed crooked stairs. Old wood creaked occasionally as the figure advanced, and on each such occasion the figure halted, listening for any indication that the floorboard's small complaint was noticed amidst the backdrop of chirping insects and vociferous night birds. Each halt turned into a pause, and then into a patient moment where awareness strained for any indication of discovery. Eventually satisfied, the sinister silhouette crept on with shallow breaths and steady, careful steps, until at last it came to a door. The dim outline of a hand stretched forward, and took hold of a cold marble doorknob. The door, too, moaned softly in protest as it was pushed carefully inward. Steady breaths became staggered and agitated as adrenaline began to surge. A pulse quickened. The door opened. Pent-up moonlight from the room's large dormers spilled outward, darkening the outline of the figure as it crept inside. As the intruder moved slowly across the room, a brief glint of sharp steel reflected the otherwise peaceful moon.

As the door fell closed again, new sounds joined the choir of whip-poorwill and owl and cricket. Nothing so dramatic as a scream, or a crash; simply the sound of cold metal muffled by soft flesh, barely noticeable above the persistent rattling of ancient shutters and the soft whine of the night breeze. The pulse was now pounding, the breath heavy, and the cold *thunk thunk thunk* of the blade was accented by the soprano squeaks of old bedsprings, and then—just as suddenly—all was quiet. After another pause, the footsteps began again. Louder, hasty, less caring of discovery, the figure fled back through door and away into the night.

The night—unconcerned with the goings-on of man—crept on, intent on finding dawn. In the distance, oblivious to the disturbance and confused by the brightness of the moon, a rooster crowed.



chapter 1 the mouth of hell

There was something foul at the mouth of Hell.

There was resistance, reluctance. A heaviness brought the air together with a humid, foreboding defiance; a slow and barring exhalation reminiscent of a woman's ire as she blows smoke into the face of unwanted company. There was the faintest of grins on the Hell-mouth's lips that would have sent chills down anyone's spine, if anyone had been there to see it. There was no one there, however. No one alive, at least, to witness the face of evil as it twisted itself into an unmistakable expression of "no" before it withdrew, and snapped its jaws shut against entry. The mouth stood closed, teeth clenched.

There was a soul, rebuked and forlorn, standing before the entrance to the underworld, awash in brimstone light, drawn to the devil's teeth by some unknown instinct. Perhaps it simply found its way to this dismal pit of despair due to the cruel inevitabilities of chance, or some ill fate. Sometimes, a soul is pushed by the living, through suggestion or

impression, at the very moment of demise, leading it to this place.¹ The Hell-mouth was used to that sort of thing, and it was both experienced with and accustomed to the arrival of unwanted, misguided souls.

Typical.

The soul standing now before the gates was all of these things and more: a creature of instinct, certainly; misguided, most definitely; pushed away by the living, absolutely. It was also completely and profoundly confused. There was no clear memory of how it had arrived, or why. Whatever force had led the wandering spirit to this spot urged it forward still, towards the menacing maw of eternal damnation. *Go into the gate*, said the force, *discover what lies beyond the teeth*. Was there a tunnel? A light? The siren call of disembodied voices, promising shelter and warmth and food? Food sounded good. The spirit liked food, but the point was profoundly and theologically moot: however the spirit had arrived there, the mouth was now closed. The teeth clenched. The way was shut.

It wasn't that this thing, this pneuma, standing there before the very mouth of Hell, wasn't worthy. It had, in a rudimentary way, performed its share of 'evil.' Arrogance, greed, gluttony and pride were among its sins. Hell had no problems with this. It was Hell: home to evil, dementia, lies, decay and pestilence. Hell welcomed evil. The entity standing forlorn before the barred gates had an irksome goodness to it, as well, but this wasn't the problem, either. After all, if it hadn't deserved in at least some small way to spend an eternity in the land beyond the river Styx, it would surely have found its way to a kinder shore, to a gateway of a different sort.

¹ "Go to Hell" being a popular modern utterance towards the soon-to-be deceased.

The problem was that the entity standing stubbornly before the closed mouth was something that was so unwanted and so dirty at such a base level that it was almost ... innocent. That was the paradox.

"Innocence doesn't belong in here," thought an ancient will, and the teeth clenched more tightly against entry. Despite being the biggest and most savage of its kind, and despite a suitable resumé of sins, this soul did not belong. Most of its crimes were little more than acts of instinct, and instinct is hardly born from evil. The soul approached again, and once more the mouth of hell shrank away; it was denied.

The denial, and the logic behind it, was little more than rationalization on the part of Hell. The truth of the matter is that the gateway was a *mouth*. Even a thing designed to contain the most egregious essences of evil had standards when it came to what it would and wouldn't put willingly into its own mouth. While not as odious as many spirits in terms of its morality, this one took the prize in raw physical pungency. There was the *other* thing, as well—this soul had been touched by some power, and was even now linked strongly to a destiny that spanned the eternal rift between life and death. Deep down at the very bottom of this soul, down with the silt and scum, there was a *clause*, a fine-print so secret and small that Hell couldn't quite make it out. Hell, knowing a thing or two about twisting a lien, wanted nothing to do with it. Even if Hell had arms and hands with which to hold a ten-foot pole, it wouldn't touch this soul. The teeth squeezed closer together still.

Unable to fully grasp its rejection, the unwanted entity hobbled closer. It wasn't exactly large, though it was larger than the rest of its kind, and it wasn't exactly smart, although it was brilliant relative to its species. What it was, was determined. The spirit had, during life, a rather tough time of things, and had always persevered. Its few faint memories—mere wisps of earthly recollection—held little more than hurt, hunger and hate. It stared at the mouth of Hell, confident that it would enter. It seemed like it could fit between two of the larger teeth if

it just squeezed a bit, and because thought of any kind was rare, it felt that this thought must be a good one. It lacked the sense to realize that squeezing into Hell probably wasn't a good idea under any circumstance, and so it limped closer. With a bit of effort the wretched thing squirmed through, and was lost for a moment in the eternal darkness of pain and torment. There was a further moment of silence, what could have been a few moments or a few lifetimes; there was no knowing in this timeless, evil place. If there had been anyone around to witness it, they might claim that Hell itself recoiled. The mouth puckered. There was a universe-shattering noise that sounded more than a little bit like a whimper.

Then: a sigh.

In the time (which again could have been an instant or an eternity) after the mouth of Hell had been violated, something else occurred in the cosmos which brought a great sense of relief to the underworld. Tiny letters began to glow. The microscopic terms that clouded the fate of this sour soul grew potent. They were being read. Something else was calling the thing back. The mouth smirked in a "told you so" kind of expression. As it suspected, this soul was linked strongly to a destiny that did not involve the underworld, and whoever or whatever was at the other end of that link was pulling at the soul, reeling it in like a reluctant bass. *As it should be*, thought Hell. *It does not belong here*. Without ceremony the mouth of Hell pursed its lips, a thick and ancient metaphorical tongue sucking at the roof of a rotten maw cloying with the slime of lost souls, and it spat.

Whatever wants it, can have it, thought Hell, as the tiny ethereal shape sailed away through the air. It tasted terrible.

The disembodied thing, wet with the spit of Hades, rolled to a stop. It was confused, certainly. It had barely comprehended the world around it during life, and was even more confused by death—never mind trying to understand concepts so sophisticated as Good and Evil, or Heaven

and Hell. With the saliva of the forever damned still dripping from its soggy self, the rejected soul stumbled to its ghostly feet. It was no longer surrounded by the furnaces of the nether-world, but it wasn't sure where else it could be. The smell of brimstone was gone. There was a slight breeze, and the distant hooting of an owl, and a slight glow upon the eastern horizon. It seemed an infinite distance away from the gate, standing again on earthly soil. It cocked its deceased head from side to side, attempting to get its bearings, and then wondered for a moment why the ground was blackened with fire and smoke. It pondered for an even briefer moment why it was that it felt naked and cold despite the pain that coursed through its body as a result of its suddenly burnt and smoldering flesh. Despite its abrupt dismissal from Hell to this barren, earthly place, its thoughts lingered mostly on a much simpler question: it was hungry, and wondered if there was anything nearby to eat.

It cocked its head again and a faint memory finally coalesced. It knew this place. Yes, it was back in familiar territory. Home? Perhaps, for the memory brought with it the feelings of comfort and safety that are associated with one's home. The memory continued to manifest itself, providing more detail, and the soul felt strong, powerful, *royal*. Yes, it was a King, it remembered, but ...

Something was different, for it also felt disconnected and alone. It felt the cool night breeze stinging places where the touch of air should have brought comfort. The pain was hollow, cold, *deep*. The thing looked down and saw itself. Two sturdy and strong legs: one intact and one bloodied; one supported by three strong and sharp talons, one with nothing but a burnt stub and one sharp claw. *That's not right*, the thing thought, though it didn't seem to mind the deformity. It scratched at the earth expectantly, raising a small wisp of ash. It didn't think to wonder why there might be ashes here, so far from the burning gates of Hades, or why its own body was so suddenly burnt, when the fires of eternal sin had left it untouched. It never drew the connection between these disturbing

details and its own sense that something had changed. It took things in stride, confident in itself despite the pain and confusion. It flexed a wing, and then another, feeling the strong muscles ripple upwards through its frame as it stood in the grayness of predawn.

Inevitably, over the rambling line of an ancient rooftop, the sun appeared and warmth washed across the thing's inexplicably damaged body. The light was a thin slice of brilliant power that cut the darkness like ... *fire*.

It remembered.

There was a huge and devastating fire. Not the same as the brimstone of Hell, visible through the gates just moments before, but something real. Something earth-bound. Something that burned more deeply because of the circumstances of the blaze. The new light showed the scene more clearly with each passing moment. There had certainly been a fire, there was no doubt now. Where there was once a bounty of worm-filled soil, there was nothing more than a splotch of char, and bones, and stench. The thing would have been shocked, if it weren't so hungry. The smell of the burnt corpses surrounding it awoke the hunger further. It smelled like barbecue. The thing scratched the earth again, and then scratched at the bones, but there was nothing left to eat.

This thing, defeated, was not capable of weeping. It was not capable of crying out, "Why? What have I done? Where am I?" Impotent, it was unable to thrust its will into the spiritual places of the world to demand an answer. It once had power—it was an exemplar of its species. Now, it wasn't really capable of much at all, and it was alone. There had been others before, but now all it had was instinct, and—forgetting its hunger for a brief moment—it succumbed to one such instinct. An instinct that was primal, unavoidable and as certain as the progression of spring into summer, autumn into winter. The urge became irresistible as the sun emerged fully from over the rooftop and cast the new day across the scene of carnage. With the light came another, more distant memory,

of lights and warmth and food and sleep; a distant image of a foggy past that ripened into a collage of stink and confinement and pain and—

Losing itself in the moment, memories were cast aside and the lost soul pointed its scarred and scaly face towards the sky. In the silence of the morning, the sound carried through the nearby house and woke the people there, as it had many times before. The echoing *cock-a-doodle-do* sounded somewhat hollow, and despondent, and uncertain.

In the house, a man was yanked from sleep by the noise. He'd heard the sound so many times before but he knew he shouldn't be hearing it now. He sat up, sleepy and confused. Perhaps he had imagined it? He looked at his wife, who was only barely able to throw him a hateful look before she rolled away back into the comfort of the large feather bed.

Cock-a-doodle-do! The sound continued, persistent, determined to call in the new day. The sound was stronger now, full of feigned conviction, like a man boasting his courage through terror and tears.

The farmer and his wife had no choice but to wake; the farmer's confusion kept him from sleep. He jumped from the bed, the wife's foul mood growing hotter as she was forced awake by his noise and activity. Inside the old farmhouse, though angry and argumentative, life began to stir.

Outside, the rooster continued to ponder the faint memories, as it wondered what had happened. It had a decent life at first, and a tail to be proud of, but that hadn't lasted long. There was a ribbon-flash, and things had changed. It remembered being unstoppable strong—omnipotent, and yet ... sad. Somehow it had found the Mouth. It had found itself before the gates of Hell, with no recollection of how it had gotten there. It hadn't understood what Hell had been. The poor creature was too simple-minded to grasp the simple fact that it had approached the gateway to the underworld, boldly entered against invitation, and had for some reason been turned away. It threw back its head and crowed again, oblivious of its own lifelessness, reveling in the light of the day.

Knapp



chapter 2 *bird and boy and bastard*

Long ago, before the incident at the mouth of Hell, in a small box of aluminum scabbed over with straw, lay a single, speckled egg. It lay in a crust of filth, kept warm beneath the downy belly of a large plump white bird. As nature dictated, the consistent warmth of the hen inspired, in time, a small crack to form in the dappled shell, as the infant chick within sought freedom. Chicken trapped within box, egg trapped under chicken, chick trapped within egg. It was an ignoble birthplace, but typical. Stacks of similar nests stretched away in each direction, three boxes high, each with a small opening in the front and a latched tin door in the rear. It was through this door that rough human hands collected the few items of which a chicken might feel pride: eggs for food, chicks for perpetuity. It was through this door that the ever-cycling population of enslaved fowl was either nurtured into existence, or, as sometimes happened, fried with bacon. They weren't slaves, exactly, but something worse: they were *domesticated*; beaten down and driven dumb by generations upon generations of unthinking servitude. The ones who were

earmarked for breakfast were the lucky ones. Fortunately for chickens, they never saw it coming, having the relative awareness and attention span of a crack addict in a kaleidoscope factory.

The egg's eager fracture widened and a tiny beak appeared, followed by something wet and brown. The egg shifted itself under its mother as its inhabitant wiggled about. A few rows down, the clatter of a tin door catalyzed a wave of squawks and ruffled wings. The first hen, spooked by the noise, fluttered and screamed as if all Hell had broken loose, spurring its neighbor to do the same, and so on down the line. At the source, one hen protested loudly as she was lifted and then replaced. The door clanked shut. The birds calmed.

"Must be too early, I've got nothing ... *still*," a voice called down the row.

"Stop whining, you're almost done. We've got to check them all." The new voice was barely audible over the racket of wings and clucks, which filled the distance between the two men. Another door opened and closed. The brown spot of down pushed harder, the beak striking eagerly against the fragile bits of shell around the widening fissure. A flat, metallic clink indicated the opening of another door, and then another. And then there was light.

The chick's eyes were shut, but the tiny speck of barely formed brain matter knew that something spectacular had happened. A rush of air ran over the soggy down like oil across a surface of water. The light cut through the protection of tiny lids, sent synapses along miniscule optic nerves, and flooded the pinhead-mind with unbearable light.

"Figures! We've got one here, but it's wrong." The infant bird was lifted roughly. It was squeezed tight by mighty hands ten times its size, and buffeted cruelly by the mad flapping of its mother hen's wings.

"Wrong? How can it be wrong? If it's dead, chuck it. If not, bring it to the incubator." The words grew louder and were accompanied by

footsteps. A second set of hands palmed the chick, held it up to the blinding light. "Looks fine to me."

"Except it's *brown*. This whole row is supposed to be *white*. I keep telling Doc that this free breeding stuff is a bad idea. Hell, these eggs should already be in the incubator. You leave 'em to hatch out on their own, and all we get is dead chicks, bad eggs and cross-breeding."

The world spun, lights shifting around the hatchling, confusing its limited newborn senses, which had yet to develop into limited adult senses.

"Yeah, yeah, but you know Doc. Hmm, definitely not a leghorn, but looks healthy. Big too. Already. Shit, we don't have any ostriches hanging around the place, do we?"

"Funny."

"Well, shit, look at the size of the thing. Must've been when Jim left the gate to the heavies open. Looks like a game bird. Cornish maybe. Crappy layers."

"Maybe its got enough leghorn in it to fix that. Anyway, might as well throw it in with the rest of the mutts."

"It should be in there already. All of 'em in the oven, hatching the natural way. Not out here shoved under these stupid chickens." His tone was that of frustration and contempt. It had been a long day of doing things in what he called "the hard way."

"Are you kidding? This is the natural way, stupid. You think wild chickens lay their eggs in incubators, do you?"

"Ain't no such thing as a wild chicken," came the retort. "And they should, 'cuz then I wouldn't have to grope their damn butts every day looking for eggs!" The two continued to bicker as they walked together to the end of the rows and through a heavy swinging door to the incubator room.

There the tiny life was placed into a warm and humid place, where it was cared for by a new set of hands, only slightly gentler than the first.

In the warmth of its new home, it slept and grew. Eventually, it opened its eyes and saw the world for the first time. Next to it, nestled in the soft pine shavings, was another—a hen—even tinier and more fragile, with the faintest nub of ruby-red under her beak. She was shaking, whether from the cold or from the shock of life, it could not tell. Chickens aren't much for thought, but this little chick was something special from the start, and it huddled against the shivering hen, offering its warmth to her.

As if protected by some invisible shield of luck, this small, noble bird grew larger, stronger, smarter than the rest. While other roosters were unceremoniously thinned from the flock, this little bird showed promise. At just six weeks, it had already grown a tail like a Phoenix, so dark that each feather radiated a different color—just a hint—before sinking into dull black. It was stout and beautiful. It was, thought the elderly farmer called Doc, good breeding stock. So, at the start of life, things were good. That is, if 'good' meant living in a cramped commercial coop, forced to live in your own feces, awaiting the inevitable eventuality of the soup pot.

Chickens had long ago lost any capability for organized thought. Decades of inbreeding for fat breasts and large eggs had taken its toll on the mind. This bird, however, did have a thought; paper thin and only partially coherent, but a thought just the same. Somehow, this rooster was able to know that life could be good. It played its part, and kept itself clean and fit. It protected the fair hen, its friend from birth, which had grown into a beautiful, fertile concubine. Together they produced eggs for the farmers, who came to view the pair as pets more than livestock, and who would bring them scraps from the table in silent gratitude for their worth.



Far away from the tiny rooster, in a small suburb of Detroit, another babe was born. A man child, fully sentient and anything but domestic. There was no shell, no rough hands, no rude violation of the mother. The delivery occurred at home, amid a pile of pillows and over-packed bags that were the result of a well planned but poorly executed trip to the hospital. A terrified almost-mother and a nervous almost-father crossed the thin line into actual parenthood with no casualties other than one cream-colored carpet, which had needed replacing anyway. Since that very first day of the child's life, he and his mommy and daddy all fared exceptionally well. The boy grew quickly and seemed both healthy and remarkably intelligent—he was able to drool and make nonsensical noises better than all the other infants and even a few of the toddlers. As he continued to grow and develop, the small house in the small suburb of Detroit was surrounded with nothing but happiness.

Time passed, and the blessings continued. The boy walked early, and was quick to potty train. He was a bright and fit young boy, who never spoke in baby talk but jumped straight from the nonsensical noises into complete, appropriate sentences.

His first words were, "Mom, I'm tired."

"Did you say something?" mother said to father, and then there was a commotion as they realized it was their son who had spoken. "Oh my lord, did little Arnie just say something?" They were so shocked, having expected something more along the lines of "purgle?" or "dat!" that they completely forgot to photograph the event.

Little Arnie rolled his little eyes. "I said I'm tired," he affirmed to the two stunned parents. "Can I take a nap?"

From that point on it was no surprise when Arnie learned to ride a bike—without training wheels—with just one try, or when he was reading before kindergarten. He would squirrel away behind the sofa with books he'd stolen from the bookshelf in the den, working secretly through the symbols until they became recognizable, and then

organizable, and finally understandable. It didn't surprise his father when he asked to open a bank account, or complained that his first-grade teacher seemed a bit lazy, or when he asked his parents to please stop calling him "Arnie," because he really preferred "Arnold."

One accomplishment after another, Arnold continued to amaze, but rarely astonish, his parents. Everything went uncommonly well for several years. From the time of his birth—a brief if unplanned labor that lasted less than an hour—until well into his pre-teen years, the boy's parents had absolutely nothing to complain about. He was smart, and polite. A tiny gentleman. Everything was so easy with him it was almost unnatural.

Arnold had been named after his father's uncle, once-removed, who had been a doctor of medicine and quite successful in his time, although he didn't hold a candle to the brilliance of the boy. Arnold was a wiry, wily and strong boy from the moment he entered the world, and he seemed to be blessed with good fortune. Or something like that.



Another life, in yet another place, paced back and forth along the length of an old farm porch. Unlike the chick and the boy, this man had been born for quite some time already. His skin was leathery, as if the alligator skin of his elbows and knees had performed a *coup de grace* and usurped the soft skin on the rest of his body. He slouched a bit, and made a habit of running his hands through his thick hair.

The man's mind raced. That is, each thought came quickly upon the heels of another, although the thoughts themselves were thick and dull—mostly due to lack of exercise and a few too many beers. He paced along the rail because he was nervous. His mind was racing because he was trying to make sense of a complicated situation, while fighting off a nagging sensation that he was about to make a huge mistake.

Without breaking stride, he paced off the porch and out into the gravelly dirt drive and turned to look back at the place. It was huge, bigger than he and Janice could ever need. Hell, they didn't even have kids. If they started right away, it would still take years to fill this place with enough brats to make it worth the trouble of upkeep. The windows leaked, as did the foundation, probably. It needed painting. A lot of painting, he thought, as he scanned the almost never ending expanse of clapboards.

The deal was damn good, though, he was sure of that. If he could put a business together here, he knew he'd be able to write off most of the meager mortgage, and almost all of the phenomenally high taxes. Thinking of taxes made him spit; Uncle Sam was taking almost as much as the bank on this place.

"What am I getting myself into, buying this stupid shit-hole of a house?" he asked no one in particular. A stiff breeze picked up, blowing sand into his eyes and forcing him to cover his face with his arms so that he didn't see the car pull up, although he could hear the crunch of the tires against the unpaved drive. He squinted, and saw the heavy door of a tan Caddy swing closed, revealing a pair of stubby legs in a stocky brown pantsuit. It housed a stern and ambitious looking woman, who was squinting at a bundle of papers.

"Bobby Ger ... Gerfun—

"Garfundepfelt," the man said, wiping the sand out of his eyes as the breeze quieted as unexpectedly as it had arisen.

"Ah," she replied, resisting the urge to add a trite "Gesundheit." Tucking the mass of papers under one arm she extended a hand. "I'm Nancy, Boombard and Swallows Realty." She shook his hand and he could feel the greed through her skin. It suddenly occurred to him what was worrying him so much: it was the whole deal, everything was just too good to be true, too easy. This is not what buying a house is supposed to be like. This should be difficult and twisted, full of tricks and

snares and red tape and never, ever, not in a million years should it be this simple.

“Nancy, nice to meet you,” and then with a bluntness characteristic of Bobby, “so this is for real, huh? I mean, what’s the catch?”

Shark-like real estate eyes flickered to the house, and to Bobby, and back to the house. She hefted a folder and produced a pen with the grace of a matador, preparing to spear another big, stupid bull.

“No catch. Honestly, I don’t know why this place goes on the market so often. I mean, it’s a bargain. Must be because it’s just so big. Though I understand you’re smarter than the rest and you’re going to put this thing to some *real* use.” She was referring to the obvious history of failed industries that the farm had seen in its past. Bobby, being a big stupid bull, caught the woman’s saber of flattery full in the face. Mixing analogies like an amateur bartender mixes drinks, Bobby swallowed her words hook, line and sinker. “It is awful big...” he finally managed.

“It contains, in all, some twenty acres. That is, well—no wait, here it says seventy. It seems to contradict itself on a few points, but nothing a quick survey can’t sort out. The house itself is very big. A veritable castle!”

“Hmm. Castle. Dracula lived in a castle.”

“Did he?”

“Yup.”

“Well, I can assure you that this is just a house. There are no vampires here.” She stifled a nervous laugh, determined to regain control. Stepping back, Nancy Boombard of Boombard and Swallows Realty made a show of examining the beauty of the property. As she hoped, Bobby’s eyes followed hers, taking in the entirety of the estate. Having recovered the situation, she then steered the conversation back in the direction of a signed sales agreement and a fat commission. “It is spacious, certainly. Plenty of room for opportunity, in a house like this.” Bobby hesitated.

“... and there’s this solid stone wall that surrounds it all.” She added, hopefully. Bobby looked around, following the fieldstone wall until it disappeared from view.

“All the way around? Around all of it?” It was hard to believe that such a wall could exist.

“Yes, I think.” There was an uncomfortably long pause. “... and there are many, um, trees.” Nancy finished feebly.

“Well, so there are. So there are. Trees, a wall, and ... what was the other thing?”

“Opportunity, Mr. Garfundephelt. Lots and lots of opportunity.” Bobby’s skepticism faded against the growing brilliance of his greed. It did have potential, this place. It had the potential to make him a heap of money with (and this is important) minimal effort.

More words were exchanged. Papers were signed, and the tan Caddy lumbered away, leaving Bobby alone, the proud owner of an impressive historic piece of farm property. It could have been the light of the fading day that made the house look, well ... *pleased*. The beginnings of a sunset reflected from the aged, leaded windows, making them glimmer like the eyes of a happy child. The sagging roof of the porch looked almost like a grin, which was ridiculous, as everybody knows that houses can’t grin. Especially wide, wooden, shit-eating grins like this one.

Arnie never went to Hell. Nor did Bobby—at least not entirely. Neither saw the red-hot glow of damnation, never smelled the acrid burn of despair. The boy simply grew, finding his way through life as boys do. It was a normal life at first, and then less normal, and eventually it was anything but normal ... but it was still life. The Rooster, lacking the necessary essence to do the same, did the best it could and made a parallel journey through death. Of course, “death” is not necessarily accurate, as the Rooster was even less dead than it was alive. It was somewhere in

between, stuck painfully between worlds like a nut caught in a zipper. It found itself picking its way through the afterlife, learning how to survive in a world that was built for the living. It settled into the world, learning to interact with solid things, to manipulate the physical world. It learned, with some effort, how to channel the infinite and uninhibited powers of the spectraverse into the more mundane land of the living. In short, it grew just as Arnold did, though its existence was never anything even close to normal.

Bobby Garfundepfelt: there was nothing normal about him, either. His life had been ordinary enough for a little while, until the day that the Rooster crowed, waking both he and his wife unexpectedly—for it was his misfortune to be the owner of the very farm that a very special rooster called home. Thus the three began their slow spiral of convergence: the normal and the abnormal; the living and the dead; the good, the bad and the ugly.

While time is a fickle friend when life and death become interconnected, it could be said (in earthly terms) that things happen in a certain order. The Rooster, for example, was first alive, then something wonderful had happened to it, making it exceptional among its kind. In a cruel twist of fate, it then died, and then un-died. That is, it became un-dead and un-alive and generally un-happy. The boy, too, began as most do and grew as most do, although he maybe did it all a bit better. Until, just like the Rooster, something special happened that made him exceptional among his kind. It happened at about the same time, although unlike the poor Rooster the boy was spared the uncomfortable bit about being partially dead. Bobby ... well, Bobby had something special happen to him, too. Sorry sonofabitch.



chapter 3 one helluva flu

The vision first occurred to the young boy named Arnold when he was no more than ten-and-a-half years of age. He didn't have visions like the ESP-flashes of television detectives, or the feigned precognition of the crazy woman who loitered around the arcade. His sight simply evolved. It happened just after a fever had kept him from school for three entire days. It should be noted that Arnold's parents were not the type to coddle. Arnold had never needed coddling, being self-sufficient practically from birth. Even the worst flu would not gain him any pity nor mercy from the onslaught of chores that all parents seek to inflict upon their offspring, and his parents held extra comfort in the knowledge of their son's exceptional constitution. This particular illness, however, was different. It had oomph.

His mother, a kind and beautiful woman who looked much younger than she truly was, was running late after a restless night full of odd dreams. After waking well past six o'clock in a cold sweat, one particularly vivid dream stayed with her.

She was driving a truck down a long and featureless highway ... There was some sort of crash, and a blazingly bright vortex appeared out of nowhere, swirling and spitting. It was a storm of some sort, full of electricity and fear, and she was driving straight through it! Arnie was there, when he was still a young child who would tolerate the pet name. He was playing with a rubik's cube, belted next to her in the car. The wind was strong, and the windows in the car were down, and in a cacophony of events that only dreams can foster, Arnie was sucked from the passenger seat, swept away into the swirling wrath of air, leaving the intact seat-belt still fastened.

She woke cold and damp, breathing heavily, and looked nervously at the clock. There had been more: something about a duck ... and a plane crash ... and custard, but as her thoughts turned to the real world, the meager details of the dream faded. They were soon forgotten as she scrambled out of bed to prepare for the hectic day ahead.

She had no way of knowing there really had been a storm that night, of sorts. A mysterious, mystical storm.

"Arnie, you need to get up or you're going to be late for school," his mother called through his closed bedroom door as she hurried to get herself ready. The day was not much different from any other day, consisting of the unavoidable necessity of school, and a young boy's instinctual desire to sleep through it. The day wasn't about to change on her behalf, simply because she was running late. She called to Arnold again on her way back to the kitchen, and then again as she rushed past his room on her way to find her purse. There was no response from young Arnie. Not the first time, nor the second, nor the third.

After a brief moment filled with matronly concern, the door opened, and his dear mother entered, a little perturbed and a bit flustered. She watched him lie still, like death. It's a truly amazing thing how young boys can sleep and sleep and sleep ... "Arnie?" she called. He didn't stir. Not at all. She stepped closer. "Arnie? Did you hear me?"

“Mom ...” he whined, finally managing to twitch a little, yet barely disturbing his blankets. He stretched the simple word into several wavering syllables. He mumbled something else, which sounded like “Please don’t call me Arnie.”

“What?” His mother wasn’t going to fall prey to the wiles of her son. Not so easily, anyway. It was spring, and she knew all too well about how boys grew tired of school well before the snow had fully melted. “You’ve got to get up, you’ll be late for school.”

“But I feel like—”

“Arnie—” she warned, sensing the word that was about to follow. He’d been picking up swear words at school. He’d been picking up bad habits in general lately. She knew she’d had it easy up until now, and he was over ten years old. It helped knowing that she’d had a solid decade of good behavior, while other mothers had gone through multiple hellish phases of development. She also knew that he would soon be eleven, then twelve, and then after that he would transform into a dreaded “teen.” The occasional expletive wasn’t much to worry about compared to sex, drugs and who knows what else, but she remained determined to stem them off, if possible.

“I feel like a turd,” he finished lamely, with a bit of last-minute censorship. He rolled towards his mother. He looked sunken, and dark. His damp, pale gaze looked past the woman into the eyes of some invisible stranger as he pleaded with her, as if she were one foot to the left and behind where she was standing. Arnold always made a point of making his mother happy, and that usually meant respecting her desire for clean language, but he was in a mood.

“I mean, I really do feel like shit.” He managed a grin and then slowly—as if with deliberate effort—he pulled his focus back to see her where she truly was. Only this time he looked down, ashamed. He’d been playing, swearing directly in the face of his mother, testing limits—a joke

born of defiance and only let loose from his inhibitions by the fever—but he knew he was wrong. He did feel like shit, but now he felt even worse.

“Arnold—oh my God,” she hurried closer and knelt down beside his bed, leaning over him, and only then, after she was motionless by his side for a moment, did he manage to fully align her with his stare.

“Arnold? Are you all right?”

Little Arnold stared at his mother. She looked weird. Well, not weird—she was a fairly typical-looking woman in her early forties. She stood about five foot four, with hair that sometimes looked blond but was really more of a sun-bleached brown. She had brown eyes, too. Even her complexion was earthy, making her look natural overall, though she was far from it. She had always scoffed at farming, especially disliking the smells that occasionally wafted through the small suburb from that “dirty remnant of a farm” that was just a few miles down the road. She didn’t even tend a garden, and denied possessing any affinity or connection with the Earth, although she always gave the impression of being a nature-lover. It was what attracted his father to her; Arnold had heard the story many times of how his father had been drawn to her natural beauty, only to be trapped by the coy city slicker hiding within that shroud of earthly gauze.

His father was a bona-fide hippy. He had adapted to a middle-class life and a middle-management job, but he never really belonged anywhere near Detroit. He loved his wife and was happy to be by her side, no matter where they went. While he never complained, there was always an extra glow about him when he stood outside in the sunshine, breathing what little fresh air there was to breathe.

It was his mother who was glowing now. Not with any natural radiance, though. She was literarily glowing, with a very faint blue light. Arnold squinted, and the light formed misty halos, like when dry eyes stare at a streetlight in the rain. It was hard to focus on the refraction of his mother. The ghostly afterimage wavered around her. It was clearly

her, but it held a slightly different posture, a slightly more concerned expression. It was as if some amateur film-maker had been playing with double exposures, superimposing this ethereal-blue woman on top of the mother that he knew. The technique was imperfect, and her blue double jiggled haphazardly around her. Arnold continued to stare.

With some effort his eyes focused more clearly upon her, and then looked to her left, her right, behind her, searching for something. Arnold found the answer: the effect was not random at all. The blue-mother was simply preceding the real one, by just a few seconds, as she rushed to his side. Armed with this discovery, he was able to finally track his stare correctly, and he looked into his mother's worried eyes. "I don't know Mom. You look weird. Like you're ... glowing."

"Glowing?" she gasped, as if she had never heard anything more shocking and terrible in her long, good, god-fearing life. She stood back, and continued, more quietly and to herself, "Dear lord, he's delusional."

A flu could be overcome with pills and hot soups, and some fresh air and exercise, but Arnold's kindly mother knew nothing of how to deal with delirium, and so the boy was bound to bed, missing not one but three whole days of school. Like with all illness, the boy eventually began to feel better. His fever broke, and everything should have gone back to normal, but it was still three full days before she lifted her protective wing fully and let him return to school.

"He's delusional," she repeated, over the course of those three long days. "He says he can't see it anymore, but he's lying—I can tell. Look into his eyes," she whispered to his father when she thought that Arnold couldn't hear them. He could hear them, of course. Heck, they were right outside his room, after all. Did she really think he was so far gone that he couldn't even hear her? Each day the whispered conversations grew more frequent and more concerned, the words becoming a mantra of her worry. The sounds of his mother's muttering and pacing echoed about inside the small house. Not unsurprisingly, Arnold withdrew

further. He would no longer look anyone in the eye, and was reluctant to speak. Was he going crazy? Maybe he was. He couldn't explain the glow, which was still there whenever he opened his eyes. Even though he no longer felt physically ill, he couldn't avoid the fact that he was still seeing things.

On the second day, he'd been rushed to the emergency room, where he stayed overnight. They took blood, performed x-rays and scans and ran tests of all sorts, but they couldn't find anything wrong with him. Other than being slightly dehydrated (no doubt a symptom of his recent bout of influenza) he was in perfect health. If he could really see the "glow" that he described, they felt it must be the result of some astigmatism or other ocular condition. An appointment was made for the following week with an optometrist, and it was expected that Arnold would be fitted for glasses. Until then, he would just have to deal with his "vision." When he returned home, however, he was sent to bed as if he were still sick. When he refused to stay still, he was repeatedly sent back to bed, under threat of being grounded.

"Mom," pleaded the boy, not for the first, nor last time. "I really don't feel that bad anymore. Maybe I could go to school later?" He was almost eleven, full of youth and vim and vinegar and life, and he was bored. Now that he knew he was healthy, excitement replaced ennui, and his confinement became harder to bear. His fear, caused by all the worry and fuss, had been replaced with relief. Wearing glasses would suck, but at least he wasn't "deranged." He wanted to revel in his sanity and to see his friends. If he had to wear glasses in a week, he wanted to relish every moment of his two-eyed life until then.

"No, you're not ready, not at all," was the reply, "you're obviously still sick, if you're telling me that you *want* to go to school."

"But I'm bored. Can Matt come over? After school I mean? Please?" His eyes turned as puppy-dog-pathetic as he could manage, but it was a hopeless effort. Rumor had gotten around to the parents of all

Arnold's friends that he was the victim of some horrible plague; they would never approve of a visit, even if Arnold's mother eventually gave in. Arnold was stuck with nothing at all to do. They didn't even have any good cable TV channels.

"Maybe I could go ride my bike later? My headache is looong gone," he said with extra flourish to indicate he hadn't had a headache for days. It was mostly true: it was getting much easier to deal with the dull, tired feeling behind his eyes—to the point where he barely noticed it anymore.

"You can't go riding your bike if there's something wrong with your eyes. You'll crash," she began, but quickly changed her track when she saw the disappointment on Arnold's face. "I'll tell you what. I'll call your friend Carl's mother. They're closer. Maybe we can have him bring by some more of your school work later—but he can't stay." It was a sorry excuse for a compromise. Arnold had effectively been trumped with the homework card ... he still hadn't finished the earlier batch of work, which his father picked up for him while he was in the hospital. Dejected, he returned to his room and closed his eyes against the light.

The next day, he was finally allowed back to school. Once Arnold returned to the humdrum of his public education, he quickly found that his classmates and teachers were illuminated with the same bizarre blue iridescence. A week later, he went for his eye exam with the specialist. Arnold saw the strange light surrounding the Optometrist, too, but he kept his mouth shut and read the letters as best he could. He did end up with some weak-powered glasses, but they didn't stop the strange lights and so he rarely wore them unless his mother was around. The mysterious light continued to precede everyone that he knew as if it were some sort of pre-shadow; a shadow of light, not darkness, that walked in front of people, and not behind. His father, who was rarely home, had a similar glow. As with his mother the first time the glow appeared, each of these subsequent spectral pre-flections moved slightly ahead of their

real counterparts. It was almost as if Arnold was seeing a short moment into the future. He saw people's lips begin to move and, reading their ghostly lips, could see the words before they were spoken. The light only appeared around people, never around cars or chairs or trees, making everyone around him stand out brilliantly.

When the glasses failed to help him, some of the fear returned, but Arnold wasn't stupid, so he told no one. Around his parents he pretended to be cured. With concentration and practice, he was able to force himself to look at the solid form and not the lighter, spiritual form that it followed. Over time, he learned to suppress it and ignore it.

He didn't hide it perfectly, though. He honed the skill over time, but it was difficult. The newness and brightness of the effect was a distraction, drawing his attention. It was as if there was a buzzing fly, constantly at the edge of his vision. For months after returning to school he was constantly being accused of attention deficit. When he would look at people wrong, sometimes focusing on the glow, sometimes speaking towards an empty spot on the floor—knowing that his listener would move there—it was seen as some sort of reclusive behavioral problem. Sometimes, he would wave to a friend before they entered a room or clip a classmate as he stepped around the light only to collide with its source.

These occurrences grew less frequent with time, and with practice and patience on Arnold's part, but the damage was done. He developed a reputation at school because of it—a reputation he would never be able to fully shake free of.

Interestingly, though, he was rarely if ever ridiculed. There was a certain respect among his peers that surrounded his odd condition. It was as if he were some ancient oracle and not a ten-and-a-half year old boy at all. He was not an oracle; he was simply a child who perceived things differently, but to children of that age, it made him special. Special enough to become amazingly popular at school. Although his wandering gaze was definitely seen as strange, he learned to amaze the boys

with predictions of who would come out of the girls' bathroom next. He grew much more adept at athletics, as well, and a young boy is often judged most intently upon his sportsmanship.

At tryouts for little league football, his abilities had shone through enough to counteract his slightly soft upbringing. The faster people moved, the further ahead of them their spectral shadow would emanate. He was able to see where a pass was being thrown well before the ball was ever released, and no amount of careful planning or sophisticated play could stump him. As his prowess increased with exercise and experience, he grew formidable on the field. By the time he was thirteen, he had a different sort of reputation, and all the opposing school's teams knew him. After all, he denied them of victory after victory, game after game.

In short, Arnold got by. Things were okay. He had his health, his family and his friends. He learned to ignore the rest.

Knapp



chapter 4 something winged this way comes

Sometimes planets align and shape our destinies, sometimes moons. Groups of stars, joined into pictures of men and beasts by our active imaginations, predict our fate in the back sections of cheap tabloids as they move through the night sky. Perhaps it was an event of astrological significance such as this that called the ribbon flash from the heavens and sent it screaming across the world to change the lives of man, chicken and child. Maybe it was some stronger portent: not a mere constellation, but something built from entire galaxies, or perhaps even something more than galaxies. Whatever caused it to appear, the Inter-spectral Rift was a sudden and mysterious coincidence of celestial proportions. Though visually impressive—like a towering sheet of liquid glass, soft and supple, bending away into the sky as it shimmered across the land, reflecting the light of the sun like a circus mirror—it was noticed by few. The Rift first intersected with the Earth just outside the middle of nowhere, flashing out of the heavens with the spasmodic agility of a cornered rattlesnake. It was first seen near the western border of South Carolina, where it

crashed steeply into the ground and then angled sideways along the dusty countryside. It wobbled, fighting itself as if forced against an opposing magnetic field, yet somehow holding fast as it changed course sharply, never slowing. From the deep south, it zigzagged rapidly up and across the American continent, taking only a few moments to travel from fields of cotton, to amber waves of grain, to neat rows of tasseled corn. It rippled like a giant glistening ribbon that was so thin it might only have occupied two dimensions, and would disappear entirely if viewed directly from its edge. It undulated fiercely, however, splaying its shimmering light in all directions as it sped across the planet. To the few who witnessed it, it appeared to be nothing more than a trick of the light; a brilliant flash of color, as if the Aurora Borealis had been ripped from the northern skies and planted within the earth. No one noticed it because, as brilliant as it was, it moved incredibly fast. It seared across state lines, moving rapidly and erratically but leaving no trace of its passage. It moved steadily northward, until it finally dwindled and dimmed into nothingness.

It hadn't drawn much attention, so there were few accounts with which to help track its course. Luckily, the exact path was unimportant, save for two points of special interest, both of which occurred near Detroit, Michigan: the first, in a small typical home in a small typical suburban neighborhood, where a young boy blinked away a sudden burst of light and was stricken with a mysterious yet enlightening flu; the second, a few dozen miles outside of the western edge of the city, along a nondescript section of highway that would shortly intersect that very same neighborhood. Neither place was special, other than to mark the only two points at which the mysterious light intersected with a living being.



A truck driver drove his rig eastward through the early morning mist, listening to an old radio that was turned down so low it was barely audible. He was a stout man, tanned on one side to an extreme and pale on the other (a hazard that all professional drivers face). He had dark black hair and narrow eyes, and was so evenly divided between light and dark tones that from one side he looked to be of Mexican decent, and from the other he resembled a Boston Italian. The hair on his head was thinner than that on his back—a fact that was evident due to his attire: a too-thin white collared shirt made of cotton, with no undershirt. He barreled down the interstate oblivious to many things: the speed limit; his own fatigue; the safety of other motorists; and the sudden flash of light—which was extremely bright but only lasted two-thousandths of a second—that washed over the extensive trailer of his rig, weaving around and between the cargo.

The truck carried poultry, and was headed east into the city, then south and then east again. The truck driver whistled along to the faint tunes on the radio, happy to be approaching the city early, while the traffic was thin. He'd set out even earlier, when most people were deep asleep and the roads belonged to truckers like him. The morning haze was also unusually thin—enough so that he was making good time; at this rate, he'd be through the city and approaching Toledo in time for lunch. He'd find a place to stop there and get something quick to eat, and if his luck held with the traffic, he'd be able to skirt Cleveland and be in Pittsburgh early enough to catch second shift at the Motel Ten. It was a small local place that he preferred, not because the rates were low but because the girl behind the counter would sometimes have a drink with him after her shift was over. Traffic was tricky in these parts, and if things turned wrong it could add hours to the drive. If that was the case he'd head straight east and bypass Pittsburgh altogether. If he was going to miss her anyway he might as well start trekking into the more secluded roads towards the eastern coast.

The truck, a metallic color that lived somewhere between maroon and purple, was meticulous. Inside the cab things were sterile except for a single travel mug, which might have been used to benefit several branches of biomedical science. The upholstery was clean, although the springs were sunken and tired, forming a deep cup beneath the driver's munificent form. Outside, the truck's chassis glowed. It was washed and waxed far more frequently than the driver, and glistened from bumper to hitch, from which point back it turned steadily from gloss and gleam to varying degrees of dust and stink. The cab pulled two long trailers: one a commercial produce trailer, consisting of dozens of aluminum cages riveted in rows along a sturdy steel spine; the other a common flatbed, piled high with slotted wooden crates. Each cell, metal or wood, was stuffed with anywhere from a half dozen chicks to a full score of smaller birds, and with such a cargo it was impossible for anything downwind to hold a shine.

The sudden arrival of the shimmering Inter-spectral Rift flashed a million colors of prismatic light as it cut through the cargo and then jolted away—all in a matter of microseconds. Luckily, the Rift didn't dislodge any of the clucking and fluttering cargo: it left no indication of its presence on the trailer, or on the wooden crates, or even on the taut nylon straps that held it all in place. It did leave its mark on one small form, crammed into the topmost crate at the rear of the second trailer.

It was one crate of six, and it held one rooster of six. They were the elite: the finest half-dozen specimens of their kind, held separate and safe for transport. Each had been selected by the same men who previously nurtured one rooster so well that it actually developed a fondness for the approach of heavy boots, and the touch of warm, featherless hands. One of the six, however, held a very noticeably special rooster, which had just seen the light of eons flicker through its soul. It had no reason to suspect that anything had changed, though it was suddenly aware of an icy wind pushing its way through feather and down, chilling each of the captives

to their very souls. Yes, even chickens, who are mindless and often senseless, have some sort of spirit to contain.

For the most part, the other birds were crammed together without luxury. They were livestock: nothing more, nothing less. They stretched away, row after row, front to rear, side to side. Below, the lower stacks grew more crowded still, dark and thick as the upper layers blotted out both light and fresh air. They cowed predictably to the Alpha Six, who were so obviously superior that even they, in their limited mental capacity, recognized their place. The one rooster, however, surpassed them all, in many ways. It was smart (for a chicken), and it was strong (for a chicken), and it was wise (for a chicken). It was a full-grown cock among yearlings, and therefore outweighed the others by a good deal, which would have been enough to satisfy the normal rituals of Leadership Through Dominance, though in this case there had been no struggle at all. For one thing, each of the roosters were held apart, each in its own crate, with no hope of one attacking another. For another, the one rooster had an aura of kindness about it. Yes, kindness. It was just as proud as any rooster could be, and just as cocky, and just as capable of tearing out the eyes of a challenger, if it were to come to that. It did not. Five of the Six bowed in subservience, letting the One rule benevolently and with care. The others should have wanted its throat as a matter of Darwinian obligation, but the truth was that they liked their leader. The largest of the six prize roosters, which had been so carefully packed—best of the flock—side by side atop endless rows of crowded, filthy boxes had that one quality that so many other chickens lacked: it was *likable*. It was obviously the leader among leaders, and none dared or cared to challenge it (although they remained cautious and alert, regardless).

When the light cut neatly through their master, they watched with some compassion, and less comprehension. A barely noticeable spark of starlight divided their master with a curtain of light before flashing away into infinity. Though it looked like the brilliant cut of a knife, the bird

remained fully intact, though it shook and fell, blinking against the magnificence of the Rift. It quickly staggered to its feet again, trying to maintain poise as it shook again, violently, as if struck with a sudden chill. Soon things returned to normal: the Five, being chickens (and roosters, at that), quickly forgot the incident. The One raised its head, shaking its proud beak at the rest, wobbling its high, bright comb at them.

“Do not fear,” it said to them, “I am not hurt.” It shook first one leg, then the other, and then stretched its impressive wings to their full span, and gave them a flutter. The bird’s five brothers tilted their heads in unison, pointing one eye suspiciously towards the spectacle of a talking chicken. One hopped back and forth, from one talon to the other, agitated. Another knocked its beak against the wooden slats of its cage. From below, the lesser birds—hens and cocks alike, which had been stuffed together in groups of ten, without mercy, into even smaller cages—peered up stupidly.

“What are you all looking at?” the one rooster asked of them. “I’ve done my best, and have always been kind to you, and now you look at me as if I am a newborn chick, worthy of suspicion and scorn.” It stood as tall as it could while it spoke, pushing its breast so far forward that the feathers of its chest splayed outwards. It searched the masses below for a sign of its love, Helena (*Helena? Was that her name?* It did not remember any chicken ever having a name before, not having even been aware of the concept of nomenclature, but the name Helena came to mind when thinking of its true love). It wore a dark suit made of shimmering feathers, and had a gamey appearance, as if it shared ancestry with wild pheasants and fowl (which it did, to a degree). It had a comb and wattle so red and grand that they perfectly framed the long, powerful beak and bright, clear eyes. The five subordinates, in contrast, were only a few months old and were noticeably shorter and weaker, with stubby beaks and dull pea-combs. It, however, was unique and grand, and it

wanted desperately to find its dear Helena, who was raised by its side since the hatchery, and who had a coat of downy pearls.

“Has anyone seen Helena?” It asked. “You would remember her, I’m sure. She is well built, though petite, and has such opalescent plumage! Her beak and wattle are both crimson red, and luscious, and her crop stays flat even when she is full of grain. If anyone has seen her, please tell me.” The nervousness in the nearby crates increased, but there was no reply. The rooster pondered this, scratching at the sides of its cage as it did so. Eventually, another rooster ventured close, peering through the double-layer of chicken wire that separated them.

“You can speak?” the frightened rooster asked (in Chicken, which consisted of scratching at the ground in a confused manner while shaking its wattle). “*Interesting*,” it would have thought, if any other chicken besides the one special rooster was capable of organized thought. Instead, it trembled a bit, and hurriedly backed away again.

“Of course I can!” It was obvious that it could talk, all chickens could talk—and then, suddenly, the newborn awareness, which had been placed into the unsuspecting rooster by a thin ribbon of celestial power, grew. *I am the only one that can speak*, it suddenly knew. *I am the only one that can think*, which was true. Though benevolent and kind, it was still a rooster, and so its new intellect quickly reached another conclusion: *I am the only one that can rule*. The newly appointed King of Roosters looked around, surveying itself and its surroundings. The King noticed many things: it noticed that it was noticing things, which was an accomplishment for a brain the size of a garbanzo bean; it noticed that it was even bigger and stronger than it remembered; it noticed that things seemed to be glowing brilliantly, although being a chicken and therefore not very good with colors, it couldn’t tell that things were glowing blue. It noticed that the sharp chill flash of light that occupied its soul just an instant before was fading, like the glow of a red-hot iron as it is removed from the heat. The Rooster also noticed that it was growing—rapidly,

although at a slowing pace that corresponded with the ebb of the lingering soul-fire. Finally, it noticed that it was very angry, and frightened, and perhaps more importantly that it was aware of being angry and frightened.

The most immediate thought to form in the Rooster's new intellect was: *We are trapped*. It, and its kin, were in cages. In many cases, they were packed into cages that weren't fit to lay an egg in. There was a terrible wind that, upon reflection, seemed to move opposite of their direction of travel. A sudden awareness of physics confirmed that they were traveling at high speed, in cages, attached to some unknown beast of burden. The conditions were savage at best, and—by the smell of fumes and the unnatural texture of things—they were man made. The King was growing larger, too, and was at risk of filling its entire cage, but it managed to turn and twist enough to look down, and back, and to the sides; a sea of chickens were being scratched and battered as they fell against each other, but there was no sign of Helena. As all roosters are wont to do, it turned its attention inward, to itself: it was still growing, and it was strong—stronger even than before. A new thought formed: *escape*. Their prisons were tethered by thin straps, stretched tight across the tops of the crates, and the King bit into them, where it could reach through the wire, striking hard with its sharp—*it had never been this sharp before!*—beak.

Looking around, the King noticed they were rushing past an area of wide fields dotted with a number of high, painted man-coops. It was the outskirts of a distant suburb. Grass turned quickly into thick areas of brush and small copses of evergreens. In the distance—and approaching fast due to the speed of the truck—a denser neighborhood appeared on one side of the highway, and what looked like a strip mall appeared on

the other.² Further ahead still, the glassy spires of distant skyscrapers could be seen. “There are fields all around us, full of food, if we hurry,” the King said, attempting to put the other birds at ease while it formulated a plan for freedom. The others looked at him with stupid indifference

“Now,” the King urged, fearing the worst, “I will free you!” They reacted only with cautious indifference. How dull they were, compared to the shining splendor of the Rooster King, but they were its subjects, and so it would fight for them. That is what roosters do! The beak tore away the nylon strap, and it soon began to fray, and then split, until it finally snapped. The King looked up in what was meant to be a pose of triumph, but it had grown even more in the past minutes, and was now forced to crouch within its confines, its long black neck pushed backwards and down. When the restraint was removed, the crates began to rock and bounce with the turbulence of the road, and the King began to feel afraid again. *Suppress fear*, it thought, *you are the King!* Willful courage, however, did not account for the poor quality of midwestern highways, nor did it expect to see the crate by its side, which contained one of the King’s elite brothers, topple over the side of the truck. There was a loud crash that was quickly carried backwards and away into silence, drowned by the rush of wind and the sounds of the road. It was gone.

The truck driver hummed to himself as the truck continued on its way towards the city. There was a good deal more noise and commotion than normal among the cargo, and a few more feathers than usual were caught up in the rushing wind. The topmost crates, near the rear of the trailer, began to bounce around, but he didn’t notice—not even when a resonating “cock-a-doodle—” was cut suddenly short as the recently

² The Rooster wasn’t sure what a strip mall was, but it had a sudden craving for pizza, bargain shoes, some fried rice, a karate lesson, a new pair of sweat pants—in that order.

freed rooster, a prize bird, fell over the top of a roadside fence and rolled, broken, into oblivion.

The driver, whistling now, noticed just in time that he had missed the exit for a mandatory weigh station. Checking his rear view mirrors for policeman's blues, he failed to notice the distant spray of feathers and a bloody wing, barely visible in the breakdown lane. He stopped whistling and craned his short neck to make absolutely certain he hadn't been seen and failed to notice the rather spectacular cloud of feathers diminishing into the distance. There were no cops, so he turned his attention (if you can call it that) back to the road before him and started to whistle again.

"Steady, my brothers, steady!" the King commanded, barely keeping its composure. "If you jostle now, you'll fall over too!" To itself the Rooster wondered, *what have I done?* Thinking that perhaps the power of intellect, being so new, should be treated with less haste, the Rooster tried to relax. The box was getting smaller, or rather the Rooster was getting bigger. Its head was pressed into a corner now. Rotating its beady eyes upward, it could see its own beautiful comb, pushed against the thin octagonal holes of the wire, a thin trickle spreading along the filament. It tried to move its legs, and managed to wriggle into a slightly more comfortable position, its head pointed nearly straight down—and there she was, barely visible through the throng, several rows directly below: Helena! Just as suddenly, she was gone again, hidden by the poultry horde as they milled about.

"Helena!" He called, but she did not answer. Like most of the others, she didn't know how to, or even care. She and the other hens scratched at the open wire at their feet, as if the instinct might raise up a tasty worm or grub. They seemed barely aware of the world around them, and were oblivious to their King's pleas. He wriggled again, staring through the pack of filth and feathers, joyful of those brief moments when a space opened through the trapped bodies to show another

glimpse of his love. He barely even noticed that his growth was slowing (and a good thing, too, for there wasn't a free space left). Reflecting on its condition, the Rooster wondered what had happened. It remembered a happy chick-hood, for the most part (though its memories, at least those prior to the ribbon-flash, were cloudy). When it did try to remember, thoughts like *warmth* and *food* and *shelter* surfaced, giving the overall impression of happiness. And there was a man, a warm pink hand that had sheltered it since it first poked its wet downy head through the sharp broken shell of its incubation. There were also boots, which carried food, and even a stubbly face that would occasionally look deeply into the refuge of the coop, checking for signs of disrepair—housekeeping, if you will. Occasionally the face would peer intently at each bird in turn, checking for disease, and there were hands to give aid when there was need. And then without warning the warmth and shelter and food were gone, replaced by hard crates and biting wire and the endless wind and rumbling of the road.

Resigned, barely able to point its beak enough to crow, the sound of the rooster's sad cry echoed against the turbulent wind of the speeding semi. It was a resonating cry that carried the weight of both passion and perception. It could be heard for miles by anyone who cared to listen, which of course nobody did, and the driver, whistling, didn't even notice.