

## **ABSTRACT**

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"The Humane Society: A Fable" Is the fanciful existential saga of a chicken named Charlie who is taught to read by an idealistic young woman named Niniane, an ardent vegan and animal rights advocate. Hopelessly in love with his human protectress, Charlie sublimates his passion by conceiving a desire to be baptized into the Roman Catholic Church, thus setting in motion a course of events that leads to inevitable rejection by that ecclesiastical body.

# The Humane Society

By

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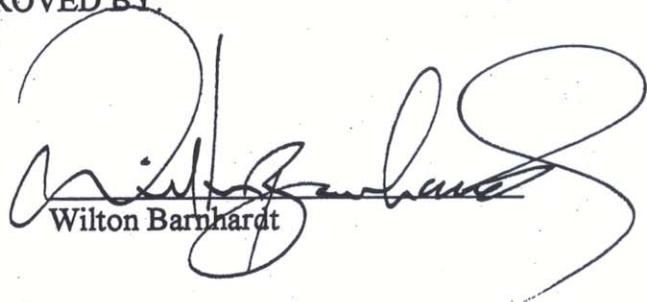
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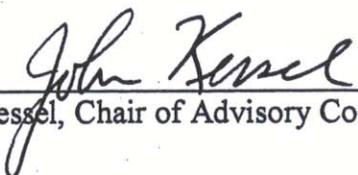
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For 'Simone'

#344. My *life* consists in my being content to accept many things.  
Ludwig Wittgenstein  
"On Certainty"

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## Chapter One/ Metanoia

To begin with, Niniane was a vegan. This choice of lifestyle, once she chose it, she considered to be the defining element of her being, contingent upon nothing other than her own will to preserve, insofar as she had the opportunity, the life and dignity of innocent non-human creatures.

Her boyfriend Dillis worked part-time in a deli near their high school, where his primary obligation was to slice various types of meat into sandwich-sized portions. That was *his* choice, and with it, Niniane had no particular problem, or so she thought. It was only upon Dillis' decision to leave school at the end of their junior year and not return that Niniane decided to question her choice of boyfriend. Never did it occur to her that perhaps the disposition to bind ones' particularity to the particularity of another might not be a matter of choice.

Dillis informed her of his decision to drop out one week before the end of their junior year, and two weeks before she was scheduled to leave town to spend the summer, as she normally did, at the family farm 150 miles to the east that was currently in the possession of her favorite aunts, May and Irene. She was on the verge of telling him that she would miss seeing him all summer when he mentioned to her his intention to thus destroy his chances of ever having a job other than the gruesome and menial one he held at the deli.

Niniane's immediate response, once she determined that he was in fact, serious, was to tell him that he was out of his mind if he thought for one minute that she would stand for such a thing. His response to her response was to drive on blithely as if he were alone in the car. At that time the two of them were in Dillis' Plymouth on the way from school to Niniane's house, where they often were idle and peaceful together before Dillis reported to work at the Deli and Niniane began her own homework and chores. Niniane had been looking forward to a pleasant interlude, it being Friday, but Dillis'

announcement ruined everything. She turned in the passenger seat and spoke sharply. "Dillis!" She repeated.

To her gratification, Dillis jumped, as she knew he would. "Jesus!" He said. "I'm driving!"

"Let me out." Niniane demanded.

Dillis sighed. He was a tall, skinny fellow with thick, wavy brown hair that was cut, infrequently and unprofessionally, by his hippie mother. "Niniane..." He began.

"I don't want to hear it, Dillis." Niniane turned her face away. "You're not dropping out of school."

"Yes I am," he said, not stubbornly.

They said no more until Dillis turned into her driveway.

"Thanks for the ride," she said stiffly as she let herself out of his car. "I'll talk to you later." she said, with a touch less stiffness after she closed the door and was on her own two feet in her driveway.

"Why are you mad?" Dillis asked, with only partially feigned innocence.

Niniane rolled her eyes and walked across the lawn into her house, hoping to leave her boyfriend with the impression, however false, of her indifference.

#

It is significant that the revelation of Dillis' intention to drop out of school took place just when Niniane became aware of the conflict between her desire to go to her two aunts' farm as she had done every summer of her life and her desire to stay at home and take some job somewhere in the neighborhood so that she and Dillis might have the opportunity to grow even closer. Niniane had never before found herself to be even mildly attracted to a young man anywhere near to her own age, and the novelty of her feelings was as exhilarating as the feelings were unsettling.

But the farm was a part of the pattern of her life, more so than she could imagine Dillis would ever be. Niniane felt more at home on the farm than any other place on earth; her annual summers there seemed to provide a rejuvenative function essential to her larger existence. Her two aunts, being former members of a notorious lesbian

separatist commune in the southwest, had made that stubbornly undeveloped stretch of country, which had for centuries been handed down from father to son in Niniane's mothers family, completely their own, and completely welcome to Niniane, so long as she respected their way of life, which they endeavored to maintain as simply and quietly as possible. There was one telephone—hung on the kitchen wall— and no cable on the TV. There were chores Niniane was expected to do, but for the most part her time was free. This summer would likely be the last summer she would ever be able to spend completely at the farm with her aunts, and for that reason alone she knew she would regret it if she stayed at home to be near Dillis. But now she had to ask herself if she would regret leaving him for an entire season. Especially now that he was acting so foolishly. Dropping out of school at seventeen! He was obviously trying to prove something. But what?

In the end, Dillis' weary silence in the face of her repeated attempts to discuss rationally with him his folly liberated her from the obligation to choose between him and the farm. She knew herself well enough to know that if she stayed, she would not be able to keep her mouth shut about it. She knew Dillis well enough to know that for her to nag only served to deafen him. If she went away, things were more likely to change than if she stayed. And she was determined that things must change.

Of course, as a fresh convert to veganism she was equally determined that things change on the farm, a place she considered to be relatively humane yet far from cruelty-free. That the necessary changes would take place, however, she was confident; her aunts being women, and politically progressive women at that, they were bound to be more reasonable than Dillis any day, and Niniane was prepared to be realistic and sympathetic in her expectations. The important thing, after all, was that an atmosphere was created in which change was not merely welcomed, but summoned. Surely her aunts would see the wisdom of what she, their niece and protégée, had chosen.

Once she came to the decision to go to her aunts, she saw with jarring clarity how she could have done no other. She blushed for ever having considered staying for Dillis' sake, and then, by some mental slight of hand peculiar to the resolute mind, caused herself to forget that such an idea had ever occurred to her.

#

After the last day of school, Dillis started working at the deli full time, and Niniane's days became, as they did at the beginning of every summer vacation, first restful, then quickly tedious. She found that she was more eager than ever to leave. For one thing, her parents were at home more than usual, preparing for their own vacation, which was to start as soon as Niniane was settled at the farm. In commemoration of their thirtieth wedding anniversary, which was on the 21<sup>st</sup> of June, the two were to commence upon on a bicycle tour of the England, Scotland, and Wales, an expedition orchestrated wholly by Niniane's mother, Ms. Thelma Westvane, who was a children's librarian by profession. Niniane's father, Mr. Horace Westvane, a city administrator, was less excited about the prospect of leaving his comfortable suburban home and desk job for a month and a half of strenuous physical exercise that he was far from being in any condition to undertake. So, the atmosphere of the Westvane household throughout the week between school and the farm was static with bristly emotions of three people who were not really used to being around one another so much.

Niniane spent much of this idle time in her room, reading and packing and pondering the nature of her feelings for Dillis. Their bond seemed to her to be unlike those forged by other teenaged couples of her acquaintance; though there was undeniably an element of physical attraction, this did not seem to be the primary reason for their being together. What the primary reason was, Niniane found she could not quite determine. She was no more attracted to Dillis than to most of the other guys in school, less so, in fact, than to quite a few of them. Neither his looks nor his brains were, as far as she could see, to any degree remarkable, and, most importantly, he was not a vegan. Niniane had initially been exposed to the vegan lifestyle by a powerful crush that she'd had on a special education teacher named Mercedes Hernandez, for whom she had served the previous year as a teacher's aide. In the wake of such a transforming passion she had never expected to become affectionate toward and attached to a high school boy, much less a carnivore. But by some twist of fate she did. They had been in the same elective photography class, and Niniane found herself admiring a picture that Dillis had taken of a flock of seagulls perched on the roof of a dumpster. With no more motivation than the

desire to register her approval of the statement that she felt the picture to be making, she'd approached Dillis in the darkroom, where he appeared to be napping while leaning against the wall, and she told him that she would like to have a print of his picture if he didn't mind. Appearing to wake up instantly, he proceeded to produce a print for her on the spot. She'd found his eagerness amusing and flattering. She'd never really had a boyfriend, though not a few had made attempts at engaging her interest, but if not their confidence, then their desperation repelled her. Dillis was different, somehow. His awkward attempts at gallantry seemed calculated to please rather than impress. His lone dog air somehow spoke to her of sophistication rather than timidity. She attributed this to the fact that he had just recently moved with his single mother from Boston, a place that Niniane, never having visited anywhere north of Washington, D.C., imagined to be flawlessly cosmopolitan. He asked her out and she accepted. He took her to a horror movie, which she enjoyed hating. Within a few weeks she reluctantly admitted to herself that she would be sorry to see him interested in any other girl. By the time it became clear that he had no interest in animal liberation it was too late. To break up with someone she was so much at home with even over such a crucial difference didn't seem necessary. She held out the hope that her example would influence him, and he would change. Hadn't the noble example of Mercedes Hernandez changed her?

Dillis had changed, all right, changed for the worse. But, she told herself; he was obviously going through some kind of crisis. More than anything else he needed her help and understanding.

#

Dillis came by her house on his way home from the deli the night before she left for the farm. She knew he was coming, and she was in the middle of waiting and packing when she heard the familiar clatter of Dillis' poorly aligned Plymouth Duster rattle into the driveway.

The sun was just beginning to set outside her window. He must have asked to get off work at the deli early tonight. She smiled. She put down the skirt she was folding and ran downstairs and outside to greet him.

Dillis clambered out of his car and, as was his way whenever they were at her house, kissed her on the cheek as if he were afraid that they were under surveillance. Niniane kissed him on the mouth and they settled themselves on the hood of his car.

“I guess I won’t see you until you get back.” Dillis said, in a cautious tone.

Niniane lay back against the warm automobile hood. The mild heat of the hood’s surface along with the balmy atmosphere of that early June evening caused her to feel pleasantly sleepy. She said nothing.

“Well...” Dillis said, “I guess I won’t see as *much* of you, though.” he paused. “Since I won’t be at school.”

Dillis looked at her out of the extreme corner of his eye, but he could detect no reaction. He took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes, then replaced his glasses.

Niniane didn’t feel like arguing, and she didn’t feel like putting Dillis at ease, either. For the first time, since he started this business, Dillis was the one feeling unsure. For her part, she felt that she would not mind if things remained just as they were at this moment, forever. The only shadow cast upon her contentment was her awareness that this moment, like every other moment, was fleeting. She opened her eyes, sat up, and stretched languorously.

“Dillis...” she sighed. “Let’s go for a drive.”

They drove through Niniane’s labyrinthine suburban neighborhood, then onto the freeway, exiting onto a two-lane highway just outside the city. They drove for about half an hour without speaking, until the sun had set completely and the night gathering about them made the unfamiliar landscape seem even more remote from home than it actually was.

“Let’s go back,” said Niniane, and Dillis dutifully turned them towards the city.

When they neared her house, Niniane said, “Dillis, what are you going to do next year if you don’t go back to school?”

Dillis continued to drive. “Work.” he said.

“Where? At the deli?”

“I guess. I like it.”

“I don’t see why.”

Dillis sighed. What could he say? Was there any way to make another person understand what you don't understand yourself, you just know it to be true? "Because I know what I'm doing," he said. "I can *think*."

"You could think at school. That's what school's for." Niniane wished she hadn't brought it up.

"Not for me," said Dillis.

"Well..." she said. She looked out the window. After a moment she turned back to him. "Dillis, I just want you to be happy."

"I am happy," he said, scowling.

"No you're not. You're miserable. What's your life going to be like, Dillis? You can't work in a deli all your life."

"Why not? What if I did? Would that be so bad? It's honest work..." his voice trailed off. She would never understand. She was too good at everything. He glanced over at her and saw that she was staring through her own ghostly reflection in the passenger seat window, as if he wasn't even there. This is it. He thought miserably. She's going to dump me.

Niniane stared past her own reflection. The most probable future for them opened up before her with incontrovertible clarity. Next year, she thought, we'll never see each other, because our lives will just be too different. We'll miss each other for a while, and then we won't. I'll go off to college next summer and he'll... he'll probably stay here and work at that damn deli. Maybe he'll be a manager, or maybe he'll find some other job and make more money. But he's not like Mercedes and me. He doesn't want anything to *change*. He wants life to be easy.

She closed her eyes against her reflection and took a deep breath. Turning, she looked over at Dillis and felt a sadness so piercing that she gasped audibly.

"What's wrong!" Dillis reached for her hand.

In order to keep from crying she opened her mouth and spoke before she knew what she was saying. "Dillis, I want you to come down to the farm in a couple of weeks."

"Huh?"

Niniane strained forward against her seatbelt as if she were possessed. “You heard me. Come down to the farm. It’s only about two hours away. There’s no reason why you can’t come visit me. You can ask off work for a couple of days can’t you?”

“A couple of *days!*” Dillis was dumfounded. “Niniane, I thought you said those aunts of yours don’t like men.”

“I never said that! I said they don’t like *living* with men. My God, Dillis, are you going to start thinking like some meathead drop-out already...?”

“All right!” he said, grinning. “So they won’t castrate me. But do you really think they’ll let me stay with you...overnight?”

“They’re not going to let you sleep with me, Dillis.” Niniane narrowed her eyes. “*I’m* not going to let you sleep with me. That’s not what I’m talking about, and you know it. But I want you to come. The farm, it’s... it’s like another world, it really is, and you’ll like May and Irene. And they’ll like you, believe me. And they’ll be glad to have some extra help...” she broke off. “...and you know your mom won’t mind.”

“Yours might,” he said.

“They’ll never know,” Niniane said. “Will you try to come?”

“Sure,” he reached for her hand. “I’d really like to. Thanks, Niniane.” His eyes blinked rapidly behind his spectacles. “I was starting to think....”

“Don’t start to think,” said Niniane. “Just do what I say. Come visit me.”

And thus they resolved by the time they reached Niniane’s house, where they parted without any hesitation or regret.

## Chapter Two/ Life Among the Savages

The farm, known for decades as “The Old Place” by members of Niniane’s mother’s family, was an hour and a half’s drive east from the city. Located on a remote and atypically hilly expanse of land along the predominately swampy southwestern portion of the coastal plain, to reach it required a seemingly infinite number of turns onto unmarked and unnamed country roads that spread like a bough off of the trunk of the interstate. In effect, The Old Place was accessible only by the detailed instructions of an inhabitant, or by memory. That is the way it had always been, and that was the way Niniane’s aunts, May and Irene, intended to keep it.

Niniane, of course, knew the way like the back of her hand, and even had to come to her father’s aid more than a couple of times when he wasn’t sure whether it was a left or right he was supposed to take.

“Left, Daddy.” She reminded him. “Remember? It’s always left turns once you cross the Robeson county line.”

The aunts must have heard Horace Westvane’s Buick crunching up their steep gravel driveway long before it reached the end, for by the time the farmhouse came into Niniane’s view her aunts were standing on the porch steps. When the car came to a halt and the engine was cut off, they descended onto the driveway as Niniane scrambled out of the front seat.

She ran first to her Aunt May, her mother’s younger sister. May was a tall, well-padded woman with long hair that she always wore in a grayish brown braid as thick as one of her soft, freckled forearms. She had a wide, florid face and an enormous bosom which Niniane was pressed into before running over to tackle her long-limbed, hatchet faced, unevenly tanned aunt Irene, May’s longtime companion, who wore her own lightning white hair very short.

Irene grunted her greeting and placed a quick dry kiss on Niniane’s forehead. It was not Irene’s way to say much of anything unless asked a direct question, which she

would more often than not answer in one word. She communicated largely through touch, and that infrequently. It was as if her presence alone managed to signify whatever needed to be expressed by her in any given situation. Even her facial expression, set in a perpetual squint, as if she were constantly peering against a glare, gave away nothing. Strangers found Irene to be a rather ominous presence, but outside of the yearly women's music festivals, strangers seldom set foot on the Old Place.

Niniane turned to her father and her aunt May, who were exchanging pleasantries. "Let's go inside!" Niniane urged. "I'm thirsty."

They went inside. The familiar scent of oil soap and coffee laced with the faint, unmistakable odor of manure from a load of clothes Irene had waiting to be put into the washer seemed to embrace Niniane as she entered the house, and she took a deep breath, then sat down at the round kitchen table.

Irene pointed to each person in turn and said, "Drink?"

"Tea." Said Niniane.

Irene pointed at Horace. "Beer?"

Niniane's father shook his head. "No, thank you Irene. I've got to head back to the city, soon as we get all of Niniane's stuff out of the car. I think she brought half her room."

Niniane ignored this. "Why are you in such a hurry, Daddy?"

"I told your mother I'd make supper out on the grill."

Niniane rolled her eyes.

May spoke up. "Horace, I'd planned on you staying! We've got plenty here, you know that."

"Not this time, May." Horace Westvane's clean, pink face and bald-head beamed. "Tonight me and Thelma are going to have us a nice steak."

"Well, so are we!" Said May. "Too bad Thelma couldn't come along. You all could have saved your money."

Niniane gritted her teeth. "I guess I didn't make myself *clear* enough when we were here at Christmas. I thought I *told* you..."

May folded her massive arms against her massive chest and turned in Niniane's direction like a mountain on the move. "*I* understood." She said. "That *you* are no

longer eating meat. And I seem to remember making it clear that you understood that your decision would be respected here, but that you would not dictate to anyone else what she might eat. Am I to understand something different now? Because, if so...”

“Sugar...” Horace Westvane’s round face reddened and he shrugged and winked at May. “Don’t give your aunts a hard time, now, okay? We all understand how you feel...”

Niniane shook off her father’s hand. “I’m *not* giving anyone a hard time!” she said. “I’m just...” She hung her head so that her long hair cascaded down to cover much of her face. She had not, of course, expected that her aunts would alter their own menu for the entire summer. May had been very clear, over Christmas about her own convictions regarding the vegan diet, which she considered to be unsustainable and in the long-term, unhealthy, though admirable in its attempt to foster a less hierarchical view of the organization of species. But Niniane would have thought, that on her *very first day* ...

Niniane could feel everyone’s attention focused unfavorably upon her. Her leg began to jiggle beneath her skirt.

“You can’t force your lifestyle on other people.” May said softly.

I *have* to! Niniane thought furiously. “I know.” she said out loud.

The silence was heavy. Horace lifted it by saying he thought he would go ahead and bring Niniane’s luggage in. Irene moved to assist him, and just as they were walking through the door the quiet of the farm was broken by an unusually loud and triumphant crow from one of the roosters in the chicken yard beyond the far wall of the kitchen.

“Why, that’s odd.” May commented. “What’s he crowing for? It’s almost four o’clock in the afternoon.”

“That old rooster.” Irene spoke out of one side of her mouth. “I think he’s crazy.”

“Wouldn’t you be crazy...” Snapped Niniane before she could stop herself. “If you saw your wives and children butchered and sold all the time?”

The three adults were exchanged amused glances now, but that was to be expected. Rome, she told herself, wasn’t built in a day. “I’ll get my luggage. Sit down,

Daddy.” She said, and she strode with dignity and purpose through the screen door of the kitchen out into the yard.

#

Not long after that first supper, for which her aunts seemed to make a point of enjoying their cow’s flesh while Niniane dutifully ate a generous slab of grilled tofu and artichokes, Niniane went to bed. Her aunts did not refer again to the earlier conflict, but Niniane could sense its presence in the house. Though she was glad to be with her aunts, she could not help but feel that her arrival had been anticlimactic. It was a shame. This summer would not be like the summers of the past, free of any real lasting disagreement. Like meat itself, those relatively placid childhood summers were lost to her, the unappreciated fringe benefits of childhood and dependence, where one’s values and decisions were based on those of the people around you who looked out for you at the expense, she could now see, of all who had no one to look out for them.

Niniane pondered all this as she washed her face before bed. From Mercedes Hernandez, who taught a class of mainstreamed retarded teenagers at Niniane’s high school, she had come to recognize that there was a real and concerted and well-organized movement to free the human race from its dependence upon the subjugation and destruction of non-human animals, but it had admittedly taken a while for her to really give her allegiance to this very captivating ideal. She could remember with breathtaking clarity the moment she made her decision. She had been eating, as she did almost every day, a slice of pepperoni pizza in the school cafeteria when, unbidden, there surfaced in her mind the grotesque image of herself choking to death on one of the greasy discs of pepperoni. From that moment on, she was strictly vegan. In being confronted, if only imaginarily, with the possibility of her own death, with all of the fear and horror that comes of such a confrontation, her mind leapt to the death of the animal or animals whose flesh had been transformed into the pepperoni. Was the death of a pig for her convenience really necessary? Niniane knew in her heart that it wasn’t. Up until that point, she had considered becoming vegan only in the most perfunctory way, half out of admiration for Mercedes Hernandez and half out of a burgeoning sense of what she knew

to be her own lack of direction. Since meeting Mercedes Hernandez, she had longed to make some gesture which would identify her, at least in her own mind, with that socially-conscious woman who seemed so effortlessly attuned to and effective with the docile retarded young adults she was determined to teach, but all the lifestyle changes that such a gesture entailed were very sweeping. She would have to change not only what she ate, but what she wore, what toiletries she used, she would have to educate herself as to the humane practices of the corporations to which her money went for even the most seemingly benign of purchases. Just to imagine a life of such vigilance made her exhausted. Its not practical while I'm in school, she told herself. But one day...

And yet, even as she rejected the possibility of change, she found that, slowly and inexorably, she was changing. Without forethought, she found herself looking at labels. She began to gravitate toward products that proclaimed themselves to be "cruelty free," and as the months went by it seemed as though not a day passed without her noticing some new item, some bumper sticker, some snatch of conversation, some television commentary, some magazine article that referred to a movement which, despite its incompatibility with her present way of life, despite its difficulty and austerity, despite the fact that its relative fringeness would leave her open to misunderstanding, felt like nothing less than her sacred duty.

But it was not until that moment in the cafeteria, during which she was surrounded by a group of school chums who she somehow knew would never understand the effect that Mercedes Hernandez had had upon her, never understand the decision she was now making, who would only laugh at her and dismiss her if she dared try to convince them of the terrible injustice that lay behind the lives they so thoughtlessly led, the suffering and pain and loss of innocent life that was the price that had to be paid for the food they were eating, that Niniane knew the time had come to make a commitment.

She put down her unfinished pizza and slipped away from the table to go outside. She made her way to the deserted athletic field and gazed across the manicured turf to the forest beyond. When I get home today, she'd told herself. I will sit down and figure out how this can be done. And tomorrow I will ask Mercedes how she manages.

Now standing in front of the mirror of her aunt's upstairs bathroom, Niniane patted her face dry of a refreshing astringent she'd brought from home. The sharp, cold,

clean smell filled her head and she felt weary but right again. She remembered how, when she'd initially made her decision to become a vegan; her aunts had been very often in her thoughts. She'd thought that they would be very proud of the radical move she was making. She knew very well how difficult their own lives had become once they made the decision to come to North Carolina and buy the farm that Niniane's grandfather, a staunch Southern Baptist who had not approved of May's leftist politics, had left entirely to Niniane's mother, who had married young in order to get away from what was then the stifling insularity of The Old Place. Thinking of women like her aunts, and like Mercedes, had helped her to feel less alone, as she found herself growing increasingly out of sympathy with the friends of her youth. When Dillis happened along, she regained somewhat her former sense of herself as what she was, a teenaged girl, and it came as a relief she had not known she needed.

What am I going to do, she asked herself, her blue eyes looking directly into her own reflection on the mirror, if he really doesn't come back to school next year. I won't have anyone to talk to, hardly.

Niniane watched her own eyes fill, her own brow wrinkle. She looked down at the sink. He won't do it. She told herself. I won't let him.

### Chapter Three/ Exterminator!

“May...”

The morning sunlight beamed eagerly through the window above the shallow porcelain kitchen sink as Niniane, without being prompted, helped her aunt gather and wash the breakfast dishes.

“Yes?” Said May, inspecting the pan that Niniane had just rinsed and handed to her.

“You remember the guy I told you about over Christmas?”

“I believe you did mention a fellow from school. Dylan, wasn’t it?”

Niniane looked down at the various dirty utensils still lying at the bottom of the sink. “Dillis.”

“That’s right. Dillis. With an ‘i.’ You, know, Dilys, with a ‘y’ is a feminine name. It’s quite common among women round my age in the British Isles...”

Niniane reached for a bread knife lying at the bottom of the sink, scrubbed it, rinsed it, and handed it to her aunt. “Well, he’s not a woman in the British Isles. He’s a seventeen year old meat head in North Carolina, and he’s about to ruin his whole life.”

“What do you mean he’s ruining his life? Is he into drugs?”

Niniane rolled her eyes. Dillis’ penchant for pot was the least of her worries. She would rather see him give up cheeseburgers than marijuana. “No. He’s dropping out of school.”

“Oh,” said May. “Well, that doesn’t sound good. What does he think he’ll do? Take the GED?”

Niniane shook her head. “Who knows? I don’t think he has any sort of plan. All he wants to do is work in a damn deli. He just decided, practically on the last day of school, that he wasn’t going to go back next year. Can you believe that? And he expects me to just be happy about it.” She glanced up at her aunt. “Men are so stupid.”

“Well, obviously he gets to you. I had no idea you were that serious about anyone Niniane. What do your parents think about him?”

“Oh, they like him all right. He’s nervous around them, so Mama thinks he’s ‘sweet...’ You know how she is... and Daddy asked me if he was ‘slow.’ They’re just relieved that I finally have a boyfriend, if you know what I mean...”

“I know what you mean. What do they think about him dropping out of school?”

“I haven’t told them.”

”Oh.”

Niniane trailed her fingertips in the lukewarm dishwater and looked out the window over the sink “I’ve got to talk him out of it, May. I can’t stand it! I mean, I if I’m going to... be in a relationship or whatever with somebody, I have to respect them...”

May laughed. “Sweetheart, you’re seventeen! What difference does it make? It’s not like you’re gonna *marry* this boy...are you?”

“Of course not!”

“Well, then relax. Enjoy yourself. You like him, don’t you? If dropping out of school is the only stupid thing he wants to do, you should thank the Goddess!”

Niniane squeezed the sponge pad in her hand. If there was one thing she hated, it was being told that something she *knew* to be a big deal wasn’t such a big deal. “Well, I guess I should just be happy that all my boyfriend wants to do is play video games and slice flesh.”

“I’m sure that’s not all he wants to do,” said May, nudging her niece.

Niniane threw the sponge at her aunt.

May laughed and batted the sponge away. She put her arm around Niniane’s shoulders and drew her in. “It really bothers you that much...?”

Niniane nodded. “It does, May. I can’t help it. It bugs me,” she drew back and looked her aunt in the eye. “And that’s why I was wondering...”

May looked back warily at her niece. “Wondering?”

“I thought it might be good if he could come stay here for a couple of days.”

“Oh, no.”

“Come on, May. I told you he was a nice guy... You can ask Mama...”

“They’re on their way to Europe and you know it.”

“Well, you should take my word for it. May, it would only be for a couple of days... I just want to have the chance to figure out *why* he’s being like this.”

“Niniane...”

“May, please? It’s hard being out here away from everything.”

May crossed her arms over her chest. “You’re full of crap.”

“No I’m not, May. Put yourself in my shoes.”

“Put yourself in mine and Irene’s,” said May. “We work hard to maintain a positive energy here. And bringing in a stranger... some young boy... what are his parents like?”

“His father’s not around.” Niniane said. “His mother’s... flaky.” Niniane had never felt comfortable around Dillis’ mother. She was a very frail looking woman with a breathy voice who had an air of strained serenity.

May looked down at the countertop and shook her head. “I just don’t know. What have you told him about us?”

“What’s to tell? He’s from *Boston*, May.”

“That means nothing,” May said, darkly.

Niniane sighed. Irene’s breakfast plate, upon which remained half a slice of cold bacon, still sat on the counter beside the sink. Niniane had made a point of avoiding contact with this defiled dish. Now she made a point of reaching for it and scraping it, without complaint, into the garbage can underneath the sink. She looked at her aunt to see if this registered.

It had. “We’ll see,” said May. “I don’t think its such a good idea, but we’ll talk to Irene, and we’ll see.”

Niniane knew better than to press her advantage. She nodded and the two of them finished the breakfast dishes in silence.

#

By the end of the morning, however, she almost lost all the ground that she gained, as right before lunchtime, the exterminator came.

The moment she saw his ridiculous vehicle, with its anthropomorphic cockroach grinning atop the cab, Niniane knew that if she saw either one of her aunts speaking to the insect killer she would be unable to contain her scorn. It was this that drove her to the chicken yard, which was shaded at that time in the afternoon by a large poplar tree. In the years to come she would reflect upon the irony implicit in the fact that it was the arrival of the exterminator that led her to Charlie.

She sat herself on the dusty ground of the chicken yard with her back against one of the wooden stakes that held the fence in place. She rested her chin on her knees and felt like crying. Confronting May or Irene with her outrage would only insure that Dillis never set foot on the farm. Niniane knew, anyway, what May and Irene would say to her, wielding their unanswerable carnivore logic. Termites, if there were in fact termites, would destroy the barn, and thus leave them without a space to store food for the livestock. The potential and potentially doomed termites, acting in accordance with their own nature, were themselves destroyers. If it weren't the barn they were burrowing into, it would be a tree, perhaps. Trees are also living things.

Niniane sighed. Looking into the coop, she could see that a hen sat within, its beak pointed straight at her. The expression of that hen, perched as she was so solidly within a shallow pile of straw, was hostile and ominous. Niniane felt inexplicably threatened by the glowering fowl. She bent her head and attempted to read the silly teen fashion magazine that she'd snuck along with her out of the house and into the chicken yard, but her mind wandered from time to time from the inane contents of that publication. Niniane's regular subscription to and growing collection of a variety of periodicals aimed at an audience of brainless teen and pre-teen girls was her greatest shame. She would rather be accused of murder than suspected of actually enjoying those magazines. And yet, enjoy them she did, though in a manner at once supercilious and wistful. She read every article with a sneer twisting her mouth, but she helplessly, compulsively devoured and retained the celebrity gossip, the dating tips, the helpful hints for eliminating acne. She groaned at the sight of the anorexic models, but her small, sharp eyes lingered over their rawboned, gaunt, empty, and yet striking faces as she tried to imagine how powerful it must make one feel to be so infinitely noticeable. Niniane had been given most of the subscriptions back when she was a somewhat loudmouthed,

yet dreamy, meat-eating, chubby little girl as a gift from her grandmother Blattery, the docile, indulgent, indolent former matriarch of the farm. She told herself sometimes that she kept the subscriptions up out of respect for the memory of the sweet old lady, who had died, true to form, submissively-- of cancer when Niniane was eleven. Niniane had liked her grandmother, and perhaps that was the reason that these magazines, even though she shared her passion for them with no one else, somehow cheered her up whenever she felt, as she felt that day the exterminator came, as if she were all alone in the world.

But absorbed as she usually was in her clandestine reading, her gaze kept sneaking up toward that menacing hen, whom, she now noticed, was surrounded by a number of what appeared to be fairly recently hatched chicks, to whom their mother seemed to be paying scarce attention. In fact, it seemed to Niniane as if the hen's attention was focused solely upon Niniane!

Despite the heat of the day, Niniane shivered. To ballast herself she leaned back against a post that held the chicken wire fence in place, and as she did so it seemed to her that the hen shifted its position upon her pile of hay. It was then that Niniane caught a glimpse of the unhatched egg still lying underneath that intimidating bird, and she found herself feeling inexplicably sorry for it. Must be a dud, she thought. I wonder how long it's going to take that creepy hen to figure out she's wasting her time on that one.

Even as she was thinking this, the hen seemed to read her mind, for the bird's abdomen rose to reveal thin, scaly, purplish legs. Niniane reared back against the fence post. Underneath the hen an egg rested on the floor of the coop. Fascinated, Niniane rose and stepped forward to watch as a tiny crack in the egg's shell lengthened, then widened, then narrowed again into invisibility.

It dawned on Niniane that she was about to see a baby chicken break out of its shell. She glanced at the hen, who seemed to regard the egg with a terrible, savage patience. Niniane tried to swallow, and her throat made a clicking sound. How long, she thought, was it supposed to take? To her the struggle between the container and the contained seemed horribly suspended. Was the shell of the egg too thick? Or was the tiny life within that shell simply too weak? That baleful hen took a step towards the egg

as if to poke it with her beak, and Niniane stepped forward and reached her hand in over the egg reflexively.

The hen made a gargling sound, and Niniane shrieked and just as reflexively snatched her hand back. But within the split second of her attempt at interference, a tiny darkness emerged from the hairline crack in the egg, withdrew, then emerged again, with an increment more of itself showing. A moment later a few shards of eggshell broke away to form a distinct hole, and out of that a tiny head appeared, withdrew, appeared again, then there was a tiny neck pistoning. There was a frantic wobble, then the crack in the egg widened, then gaped, and then out of it fell a wet and bedraggled baby chicken, which immediately collapsed onto the hay.

Niniane exhaled against the palm of her hand that was still covering her mouth. Her fear of the hen and her dismay over the visit of the exterminator had been completely eclipsed by the sight of that monumental struggle. She started to reach into the coop to touch the newborn thing, but restrained herself almost immediately. The baby chick was so fragile looking; so naked in its unfeathered state. Its breathing was so rapid and shallow that she wondered if perhaps the struggle of its birth might be the occasion of its death. But after a few moments the damp, bedraggled thing rose upon its matchstick legs and staggered over in the direction of its mother, who with one grand, sweeping motion of her wing, brushed it over to where the other tiny chicks, all of whom were covered with pale down and were noticeably larger than this one, were gathered together, peeping and scratching about on the floor of the coop. Once again, Niniane felt a surge of sympathy that raised a lump in her throat and brought tears to her eyes. She glared at the heartless mother hen. For a moment Niniane loathed that hen with a loathing so visceral that she swayed on her feet. In that moment she would gladly have seen that hen dismembered, plucked, fried, and served in a bucket. Berating herself for entertaining this vengeful image, she gathered her magazines, stepped over the chicken wire fence, and walked towards the house.

As she approached the screen door of the kitchen, the exterminator came through it and winked at her. "Hey there, little lady." He drawled, and Niniane, caught off guard, smiled at him. As she did so a feeling of incredible loneliness seized her. The beauty of seeing the chicken hatch settled on her like a burden. What would it mean to such a man

if she were to try to communicate to him the sheer wonder of having witnessed a chicken's entry into the world? He would no doubt think she'd been smoking something. Even Irene and May, she knew, would have little understanding of the intensity of her feelings. They presided over a daily round of the birth and death of livestock. Even the little chickens' own mother couldn't care less, it seemed. It was difficult, trying to live alone amongst unbelievers.

This is a brutal, selfish world, she said to the image of the little hatchling in her head. But you'll never have anything to fear from me, she promised.

#

At lunch that afternoon, Niniane informed her aunts that she'd witnessed the hatching of a baby chicken.

"Good for you," said Irene. "Stick around and you'll see it get its head chopped off one day."

"I'd rather see you get yours chopped off!" snapped Niniane.

Irene's broad shoulders shook with silent laughter.

Niniane glared at Irene, then May. She took her plate to the sink, pointedly avoiding eye contact with either aunt, then went outside and wandered around aimlessly for a while, until she found herself climbing back into the chicken yard to see the hatchling.

### **Chapter Four/ Would You Feel Exploited?**

As the bright, hot summer days went by, Niniane fell into the habit of visiting the coop in the mornings after her chores. Usually she took a magazine or her stationary with her and would spend an hour or so reading and writing to Dillis, and, every once in awhile, Mercedes. Noticing Niniane's sudden attachment to the chicken coop, May suggested that she might as well take on the responsibility for the chicken's care and feeding. It was out of this development that Niniane realized that the chicken whose entry into the world she had witnessed, seemed nowhere nearly as energetic or robust as the other hatchlings in the coop.

Niniane decided to feed him out of her own hand, cupping the feed in one upturned palm and holding him gently in the other. Once she started doing that, she fancied that there was some improvement in the little chick's appearance. At any rate, he grew larger and steadier, and was soon gratifyingly coated in thick, yellow down. Niniane loved to feel his little heart thrumming within him when she held him in her hand, and she felt sure that she was a more reliable mother to him than the forbidding hen who sat unblinking in her compartment in the coop for most of the day doing nothing more for this needful chick, or her other chicks, for that matter, than being there.

#

The little chicken, for his part, came to know, and to rely upon, Niniane's presence in the course of each new day. Though he hadn't the words to say or even to think so, he felt Niniane to be, despite the more constant presence of his mother the hen, the source for him of all that was vital. The other chicks, male and female, were all stronger and more aggressive than he, and whenever he managed to find a seed or a grub to eat, one of his brothers or sisters would rush up with all of the blithe confidence that comes of superior physical strength, and snatch it right out of his mouth. With

inarticulate cheeps, he would voice his distress to his mother, but she only stared into the distance, imperturbable. It was only upon the arrival of those soft, warm, gigantic hands from somewhere beyond the coop that the littlest chicken ever got his fill.

#

As Charlie, (as Niniane, for the sake of alliteration, began to call him), rapidly matured, Niniane began to take him out of the coop to sit in her lap or on her shoulder as she read and wrote each morning in the peaceful and shaded, if a bit smelly, enclosure of the chicken yard. As a result of this regular break from the relentless struggle to maintain himself among the stronger inhabitants of the coop, the little rooster became all the more attached to Niniane. As is usual when a human endeavors to protect something, Niniane grew to depend upon the runt chick. She found herself talking to him. She read aloud from the letters that her parents sent her from Great Britain, she read him infrequent and maddeningly short and poorly spelled letters from Dillis, and she read from her stash of teen magazines. Before long she was speaking, with his singular, familiar presence in mind, every thought that entered her head, like a patient lying on the couch of a psychoanalyst.

#

Niniane did not imagine for one moment, of course, that the chicken could respond in kind. But one day, when the little, runt chicken was beginning to develop little spots of darkness and symmetry in his yellow down, she asked it, as conversationally as she would have asked a human being, what she should write in the newest letter she was planning to write to Dillis.

At first, Niniane thought nothing of it when the chicken hopped down from her lap into the dirt. And she barely paid any mind to it when she saw that he was moving himself back and forth with his beak on the ground and raising little clouds of dust. It looked to her as if he was trying to scratch an itch on his head. But as he paused every second or so and moved not just up and down, but incrementally from left to right,

Niniane's brow wrinkled. "Well, look at that!" She said to herself, out loud. "If I didn't know any better, I'd swear you just made the letter 't', Charlie! "

Niniane smiled to herself and imagined that she was a guest on a television talk show discussing how she had discovered a means by which humans and chickens could communicate. "It wasn't long." She imagined herself saying to the interviewer "before I realized that this chicken could become a spokesperson- well, spokeschicken, for the entire animal-rights movement. By the end of the summer, we were testifying before a senate sub-committee-- and well, I guess you know the rest...."

"Just think, Charlie," she said now, out loud. "We could make the world a safer place for poultry. Wouldn't that be wonderful? " Niniane smiled and wondered why the movement had never come up with such a gimmick- why not take a parrot, say, and teach him to say something like "Don't eat my people!" and trot it along to marches and protests.

Niniane's brow wrinkled. But, she considered, that would be exploitative.

"Hey Charlie..." she said to the little bird, who now stood stock still on the gravel, facing her with his left eye. "If I could teach you how to write, "Don't eat me" in front of a Senate Subcommittee, would you feel exploited?"

The chicken turned around again and appeared to repeat the above performance. But this time Niniane was watching him with real attention. Now that she had imagined it, it became difficult not to imagine that indeed, the chicken was scratching letters into the dusty ground of the chicken yard enclosure.

"What...." she breathed out loud, speaking with increasing amazement as the chicken moved from left to right, revealing his thought.

"What...does...expl...exploit....exploited mean..."

The chicken, incredibly, nodded his small head.

Niniane blinked.

"What does exploited mean? What does exploited mean?" Niniane ran her eyes across the letters in the dust over and over again. "Oh my God, Charlie! You can write, can't you!"

Niniane stood up, and her notebook and her magazine tumbled onto the dirt. "I'm going crazy," she whispered.

She closed her eyes and rubbed them. Opening them again, she looked at the chicken, who stood in the gravel with his tiny head cocked, peering up at her with one unblinking eye. I'm imagining things, she thought. I'm dreaming.

Niniane felt a swift lurch in the pit of her stomach, and she covered her mouth with her hands. I have to get inside. Out of this sun, it's the sun; I have to get inside the house. She turned and scrambled over the chicken-wire fence, but even as she did so, her vision swept once again across the lines written in the dust, registering for the first time the meaning of the first line, written above the second, which, she realized, the chicken had scratched out in answer to the question she'd asked him about what she ought to write to Dillis.

"Tell him," the chicken had written, in emphatic, uneven letters, "to get lost."

#

Niniane ran into the house, up the stairs, and threw herself face down on her unmade bed.

#

After a while she got off of the bed, clenched her fists, and began pacing the length of the small room. She locked the door.

She turned and looked across the sunlit room out of the screened window. Outside a large black bird flew across her line of vision from one tree into another. She stared between these trees, into the distant woods.

Now, I can't be going crazy. If I was, I wouldn't care that I was, wouldn't I? I wouldn't question what I saw if I was crazy. So maybe I did see it, and there's a reasonable explanation.

She shook her head.

Maybe he was just copying me. He's seen me write, and maybe I've used those words together, and I just can't remember.

She shook her head again. Her mind mercilessly prodded her. She knew that she'd never, all this summer, spoken or written or even read the word "exploited." It was a word that for her held much significance, and one not often encountered, particularly within teen magazines. She would have remembered.

The chicken had, of its own accord, asked her a question.

*What does exploited mean?*

Niniane sat down gingerly on the edge of her bed and continued to stare out the window. She gazed, thinking of nothing for a long time, until, inexplicably, her aunt Irene's teasing face presented itself to her consciousness. Despite her real loss of confidence in her own grasp upon reality, Niniane began, without realizing it, to grin. If chickens, or even one chicken, were capable of even the simulation of conversation, then even Irene would hesitate to take the life of such an exceptional animal. It would be like killing a parrot, or a dolphin, or a monkey. It occurred to Niniane that if she could convince her aunts that their coop contained such a potentially useful anomaly, she would manage to rescue at least one little non-human animal on this farm from its subordinate status.

The possibility of getting one over on her stiffnecked aunts galvanized her. Still grinning, she unlocked her door and scrambled down the stairs and out the kitchen door to the chicken yard, hoping, now, with all of her heart, to find the impossibility that just a moment ago she had feared.

#

In the meantime, left alone and vulnerable on the ground of the chicken yard, the chicken called Charlie realized that his attempt at communication had backfired. He hopped instinctively back into the coop and back to the side of his mother, who continued to stare, sphinx like, into the distance as the rest of her brood played and slept and fought and fed all around her.

But Charlie, as soon as he rejoined them, felt, to his alarm, that he was returning, not to familiar surroundings, but being exiled to a shadowy, silent netherworld. Once again he stood apart, feeling vulnerable and conspicuous as never before as he regarded

his kindred. He saw, now, as they did not, the transience of their actions. He saw himself, as if he were still one of them, scrabbling about the henhouse, nuzzling the mother, preening his fledgling feathers, pecking at the seeds scattered among the sawdust of the floor. Even if he could survive there now, what of it? The one who had reached for him and who had shown him another realm than this mindless, hopeless one had gone away. He'd frightened her off. He now had thoughts to express, but no one to express them to. For his own kind, even for his silent, steadfast mother, it was enough to feel: self-expression was unnecessary. But something more had been shared with him, something meant to be shared with another. He knew he had been given a name: his name was Charlie. But to whom did it matter? Not to these other chickens, for whom he was simply a defeated rival.

The chicken regarded the huge forest in the distance. He knew by recalling an article Niniane had read to him earlier in the week that his feelings of hopelessness, isolation, and depersonalization were symptoms of depression. He blinked several times and longed for the warmth, quiet, dimness, and simplicity of the enclosed existence he had fought his way out of just a week and a half ago.

Charlie folded his skinny legs underneath his abdomen and perched in this position at the edge of the henhouse. He saw in his mind's eye the large house out of which the girl with the soft, warm hands came to him every morning. It was hard, he found, to put into words and images those feelings that her advent, presence, and even her absence aroused in him. He likened them now vaguely to a breeze coursing across his feathers or the slosh of a recent swallow of cool water in his gizzard. The warmth of her hands, the murmur and lilt of her voice, her sharp, sanitized, mammalian scent, the miracle of her affection for and gentleness with him, all this was beyond his power to describe even to himself. He could only recall, only feel them. He wanted these things as he remembered once wanting feed, water and the protection of his mother. But he had no power to have them, for the girl had run across a vast expanse of ground into an enormous coop that he would never be able to reach, let alone enter. He was as bereft now as if he had taken from the chicken yard and flung into the forest. He was lost without her. His head drooped. Why had she done it? Why had she chosen him out of all the others if she had not had some purpose beyond running away? In answering her

question to him, had he committed some unforgivable transgression? Was one meant, once granted the ability to speak one's heart, to despite that ability, keep it to oneself? Was the self to be the self's alone?

But she talked to me! Charlie thought. It isn't right! It isn't fair!

Charlie shut his eyes, trying, in this naive fashion, to cut off his capacity for thought. But all that shutting his eyes did was to blind him to the fact that the girl was running back to him-- it was not until he heard her footsteps in the gravel and smelled her excited perspiration that he found he had been remembered.

#

She held him up to her face for a long time, and stared at him. Back in the coop, facing the impossible reality of him, his smallness-- he did not even fill her palm--, his face incapable of expression, his tiny head which couldn't conceivably harbor a brain sophisticated enough for language, Niniane once again began to doubt her sanity. She closed her own eyes for a moment and, taking a breath, she bent and set him on the ground in front of the chicken coop. Then she knelt and spoke, as one might with a deaf person, or a foreigner, with exaggerated enunciation. "Charlie. I want you to write something for me. Something that will show that you're not just copying. I need to know that you really understand what you're doing. Can you write something like that? Anything! Please..."

Charlie's beak was already moving in the dust. Niniane's jaw hung as she breathed out the words forming on the ground before her. It was a phrase that Charlie had no doubt seen in one of the teen magazines, but she knew that he understood them and that they were meant for her.

*Will you go out with me?*

#

Niniane and Charlie sat down together, right there in the dirt of the chicken coop. Niniane spoke freely, and every once in a while Charlie would scratch a question into the

gravel, for there were still many things that Charlie, despite the teen magazines, did not understand.

*So. He scratched. I'm what's called a chicken. And you're what's called a person. And that's why you won't go out with me?*

"Charlie!" exclaimed Niniane. "Do you even realize what going out with someone means?"

From the magazines, Charlie had gathered that 'going out' with someone entailed unrestricted access to their time and attention. But perhaps there was even more to it than that. *What does it mean?*

"It means..." Niniane searched the cloudless sky. "It means... that you want to be... intimate with someone... in all kinds of ways." She frowned. "It means, to be honest, that at least at some point, you want to... Oh, Charlie, this is impossible. Just trust me. You don't want to 'go out' with me. We're different species."

*What's species?*

"Oh, God. I don't know, exactly. It just means that we're two different kinds of animal, that we can't... well, basically, we can't reproduce. We can't come together, like... like a man and a woman, or a rooster and a hen, to make little combinations of ourselves."

*That's what people in the magazines wanted to do?*

"Charlie, people in those magazines don't know what they want to do, except maybe be pretty."

Charlie knew what that word meant, having come across it in every magazine. Inspiration struck him.

*You're pretty.*

Niniane blushed. "Don't be silly."

*What's 'silly'?*

"You, trying to flatter me. Look, don't even bother to ask what flattery is... you need a real education! I'm taking you to the house. Get ready, Charlie, you're about to meet Irene and May!"

## Chapter Five/ The World Book

Whenever he was asked, later on, about what it was like to all of a sudden find himself out of the world of the chicken coop and in the world of human society, Charlie would always remark that it was no more strange than emerging from the utter dependence of the shell into the comparatively sophisticated world of the coop. But at the time that Niniane swept him up off the gravel into her arms and bounded with him out of the coop, across the front yard and into the farmhouse, Charlie was terrified. The landscape around him changed so suddenly and rapidly that he had no time to collect his bearings before Niniane had plopped him down on the kitchen table. He sat there for a moment, too dizzy to take note at all of his surroundings while Niniane jabbered in a high and triumphant voice at her aunts.

"Guys!" she said. She caught her breath, swallowed. "Oh my God, I know you're gonna die when you see this. But this is the most amazing thing that ever happened, and listen, we're all gonna be famous, because it's happened right here on this farm. But, look, we can't tell anyone yet, because first Charlie needs a little bit more of an education. That's why I brought him in here, because, once you see this, I know you're gonna change your mind about everything, I know you're gonna want to be in on it. Guys, look- don't say anything, just listen to me. I know you're not gonna believe this, but I know for a fact, and can prove it to you, that this chicken, this chicken right here- I named him Charlie, by the way- this chicken can talk!" She stopped for breath, and blinked. "I mean, write. I mean, of course the chicken can't talk, but he's learned how to write. Don't ask me how, I don't know... just believe me. This chicken can *write*. And I think he's the only chicken in the world who can. He's been writing all morning out in the chicken yard, to me!"

Niniane, her small eyes shining, regarded her dumbstruck aunts with an expression of triumph, patted Charlie's head, then joined her aunts at the other end of the round table. With the sunlight from the large kitchen windows streaming past them, the three women formed one dark mass, and for the first time Charlie was aware of the feeling of being totally at the mercy of the strange. Niniane by herself, even in the

beginning, had been lovely, fragrant, life-giving, but this collection of female humanity, of which she seemed so absolutely a part, was terrifying in its sheer bulk. Charlie felt an overwhelming urge to retreat. He backed away, to the furthest perimeter of the round breakfast table, and stuck his head under what had been serving as Irene's napkin. He stood in this manner, paralyzed, until Niniane backed out of the envelope of her aunts, and came around to him, lifting up the napkin, and guiding his eye to meet hers.

'What's the matter, Charlie?' she said.

Charlie stood up and trotted closer to her. Niniane picked him up off the kitchen table and held him to her bosom.

Her Aunt May was the first to speak. "Niniane. Put that chicken down."

Niniane frowned. "Why?" She demanded.

"Because you're about to smother it to death, for one thing."

Niniane kissed the top of Charlie's head, and set him back down on the table. His heart sank within him, but Niniane did not move from where she stood beside the table, facing the aunts, whom Charlie couldn't regard without a feeling of immanent danger. But the two older women were not looking at him at all, but at Niniane. Suddenly it struck Charlie that there was something about them, something about the sunlight and the wood paneling of the kitchen walls and cabinets, about the smell of eggs and bacon and coffee and recently awakened human female flesh that was hauntingly familiar. Something about being where he was at the moment-- in this house, among these women, on this table, even though he had no idea what was going to happen even within the next few minutes-- felt right to him. Proper. For the first time since Niniane had run away from the coop that first time he had written to her, Charlie began to feel that he had done the right thing. They're all right. He thought, now, looking at the aunts. They just don't know what to do with me. He relaxed onto his placemat.

"I know you think I'm nuts," she was now saying, her voice still high and breathless. "But I'm not, and I can prove it. "All you have to do is take this chicken-- he really does like to be called Charlie, by the way-- out into the chicken yard and ask him to write something in the gravel for you, and he'll do it. Believe me, I didn't even know myself that he could write, and god knows I wasn't trying to teach him. I just happened to be out there writing a letter to Dillis and thinking out loud, and wondering what to say

next when this chicken actually answered me! Come on... I'll show you." She made a motion to scoop up Charlie, but May reached over to stop her.

"Hold it." May said. "Niniane." She said, looking straight into Niniane's bright, but, she had to admit, straightforward looking, and not at all wild, or more likely yet-marijuana reddened eyes. "Niniane... let me see that chicken."

"Why?" said Niniane. "May, come on! This has nothing to do with how the chicken looks! It's what's inside that's important! Let's go!"

"Niniane." May said firmly. "I want to have a look at this chicken-- this chicken that belongs to me-- that was hatched on the farm that I pay the bills for-- that you have taken-- asking no one-- out of the coop where it belongs and brought into my house. I don't care if this chicken wrote Moby Dick- it could still have mites. Let me see it. Trust me, I'm not gonna hurt your precious 'Charlie.'"

Irene began to cackle.

"Hush, Irene," said May. She had taken Charlie and was holding him now up over her face in the sunlight. "Well, it's definitely a cockerel."

"I told you that," Niniane said. "It's a boy chicken, believe me. Just like any other boy, as a matter of fact-- actually, he has a crush on me."

Irene's broad hand hit the table, which caused Charlie to squawk and flap his wings wildly enough to cause May to let him drop back down onto the table, and he hid his head once again under Irene's napkin.

Irene stopped laughing.

After a moment, Niniane lifted the napkin and peeped underneath it. "Charlie, I'm sorry. That was shitty of me."

The aunts looked at each other incredulously. Niniane rose and said quietly, "Come on. Let's go out to the chicken yard."

The aunts followed meekly.

They all watched, holding themselves still as statues as Charlie meticulously scratched his greeting to the two aunts into the gravel of the chicken yard.

*I'm Charlie. he wrote. I've heard a lot about you, and I know this is you're farm and that I'm part of it. I'm glad to finally get to meet you both.*

The two women stared down at the gravel, openmouthed. "I'll be damned!" Irene said, finally.

"I don't believe this is happening!" breathed May.

"That's exactly what I said!" gloated Niniane.

May shook her head, then bent her knees and squatted down on the gravel. She looked up at Niniane. "Please tell me this is some vegan propaganda trick you picked up somehow," she said. She looked back at the chicken, who seemed to waiting for her to answer him.

"Uh... Charlie." She felt her face growing warm. "Can the other chickens... well, are they like you? If we asked them to, would they write something for us?"

Charlie stood still. He cast his mind back to his first day or so out of the shell, when he came to recognize that he was one of many others like himself, and that, now, unlike the time he had spent inside his shell, his every need was not going to be provided for. He remembered seeing the little seeds and kernels of corn scattered about the floor of his mother's cubicle, and he remembered feeling instinctively his need for as many of them as he could manage to find in order to have something inside of him to keep him from-- from what... disappearing? He remembered feeling the sense of panic, the sense of all consuming desperation that arose within him when he realized that all of the other creatures like him in the coop needed exactly the same little grains of food that he needed. But there was only so much to go around, and due to his late hatching and smaller size and general sense of inadequacy in the face of competition, he sensed that, left to himself, he probably would never manage to have all that he needed. Back then he had known of no way to communicate his need to anyone, even to his mother. Watching the others, it was clear to him that the language of the chicken coop was not much more than silence and a number of peeps and rapid, frantic gestures that meant, vaguely, "Get out of my way."

*I don't think so. Charlie scratched his reply. I don't think they need to.*

May read the chicken's reply aloud, twice, and stood up. She regarded Niniane and Irene.

"He ends his sentences with prepositions." May observed. She sighed heavily. "Well, Niniane, I have to hand it to you. I can't believe I'm saying this... I really can't believe I'm saying this, but you're right. This chicken can write. You know, this is the most incredible... What do you think, Irene?"

Irene said nothing.

Niniane was hugging herself like an excited child. "See! Now maybe you'll listen to me when I tell you that animals have rights! Anyway, now that you know, you've gotta help me. We've got a lot of work to do before we contact PETA, and maybe even the Department of Agriculture. And, oh my God, of course, the Humane Society! We're going to change the world! No more animal captivity, no more animal slavery, no more meat as murder! Charlie, you're like a Chicken Messiah!"

Charlie bobbed his head. He shared his beloved's excitement, but he was uncomprehending. He was about to put his beak to the ground and ask Niniane what a messiah was, but before he had the chance, there was a low rumbling noise that turned out to be coming from May.

"Wait one minute." May crossed her arms against her chest. "Ninny. Quit hopping up and down. You're raising dust, and it's getting up my nose... now listen to me. Don't start jumping to conclusions. This is my farm, and these are my poultry. Lest you forget. No one calls anyone about anything on my farm that isn't illegal without permission from me. That's common decency."

"May!"

"Don't interrupt. I'm telling you how it is. And before you start calling me a fascist and a murderer, just you *listen*. Beyond the fact that this is my farm, this chicken is not yours to decide his fate. Now here we both agree. If this chicken has intelligence-- and it looks as if he does-- then he has a mind of his own, just like you and me. Now, look. It's not fair for you to be filling his head full of things that have nothing to do with him. The Humane Society! Niniane, what are you thinking!"

"May, he can write! He can tell the world first hand what its like to be an animal in captivity!"

"Niniane, this chicken is not an animal in captivity. You act like I'm running a concentration camp here! What do you want from me? I keep the animals here clean and fed, they have a vet come in every few weeks, they're comfortable, not overcrowded, well treated... and yes, a lot of them get sold to producers, and some of them we eat. That doesn't mean we're going to eat Charlie-- and to be honest, I'll probably never be able to eat... poultry ever again. But you know as well as I do animals in the wild have it a lot rougher. In fact, I'll bet you that the animals on this farm have on average a longer life span than on any farm in the southeast! Maybe you think this place is a charnelhouse but..." May spread her palms out wide. "Well, why don't we ask Charlie?"

The aunt smiled and knelt down again in front of Charlie. "Now. Is this such a bad place to be, Charlie? Do you feel endangered here with me?"

Charlie remembered how afraid he was of his own brothers and sisters before he made the acquaintance of the human race. *Not at all.* He scratched, quickly.

May rose, beaming. "See! He loves this farm! He doesn't need any help from the Humane Society! Niniane, you should listen to Charlie. He doesn't want a lot of crackpots coming in here criticizing me!"

Niniane restrained a sudden impulse to pick up Charlie and throw him like a tennis ball against the side of the henhouse. "Fine!" She shouted. "I guess I am crazy! Just because I don't want to see living creatures suffering and dying unnecessarily. I guess that just makes me the biggest loony tune on earth! Well, I'll just shut up, then. Forever. You all and Charlie can do all the talking, you just figure everything out, since you know everything!"

Niniane turned away and her shoulders slumped. Charlie stood now with the aunts, and gazed at her. He wished he knew what she wanted him to say.

May sighed. "Come on, Ninny," she said. "We know you mean well. But look, you're right. I don't know everything. Christ, when it comes to something like this, I don't know anything. You know more about how animals are treated on a large scale, I'll give you that. But right now, baby, we need to think about Charlie. The rest of the world will be there. But what about Charlie? You heard... saw what he said. He likes his little life here. He's perfectly content. Niniane, if you called the Humane Society, they'd just come in here and take him away. Now, is that what you want?"

Niniane shook her head. Her eyes were a sheen of tears and her lips were drawn in.

May breathed a mental sigh of relief and put an arm around her niece's shoulders. "There you go. You're excited. That's okay. We all are. But I think we can all see that what Charlie needs right now is a lot of time and a lot of care, and a lot of different looks at the world before we know where to go from here. I think.... I think before we do anything, we need to keep this under our hats. "

"But who's going to teach Charlie what he needs to know? I guess not me. I guess I'm too controlling." Niniane pouted.

May withdrew her arm from Niniane's shoulder and clapped her hands together and rubbed them. The effect of this gesture was to suggest the acceptance of a challenge from the gods. "All of us." Said May firmly. "We three."

#

Charlie's first free act upon entering forever into the human's domain was to relieve himself on the living room floor.

Niniane was the first to realize what had been done.

"Charlie." She walked over, bent down, and whispered to him. "I hate to tell you this, but that's just about the biggest no-no in the world. You can't do what you just did in front of people. I don't want to embarrass you, but... you've kind of disgraced yourself. I guess chickens don't mind that type of thing the way we do. For us when we... when nature calls...it's supposed to be private. Do you understand what I mean?"

Charlie blinked. He bent his head and began scratching with his beak on the hardwood floor. He stopped and looked up at her, apparently unaware that he had made no mark.

"Oh!" Niniane turned to her aunts, who were standing in the doorway. "How's he going to say anything without any dirt in here?"

"Good question," said May. She was staring at the small puddle of chickenshit on her living room floor. "Maybe having him in here with us isn't such a good idea..."

"May!"

May held her hand up. "All right, all right. I don't know, Niniane. I certainly don't want him scratching all over the floor with his beak. He's made enough of a mess already."

"Maybe if we could spread just a little bit of gravel... over in that corner, he could..."

"You're out of your mind." said May.

Niniane turned desperately to Charlie, who could only stand and blink. As the moments passed without a sound from anybody, and no movement from Charlie, Niniane felt her frustration rise like the swirling water in a clogged commode. "May, he doesn't know what to do!" She said finally. "And even if he did, he couldn't tell us! Look, he's paralyzed!"

"Hey!" Said Irene. Everybody jumped. Having remembered a movie she'd seen, she walked over and held her hand, palm up, underneath Charlie's beak.

Charlie bent his head and traced the letters gingerly at first, then firmly and distinctly into Irene's palm. *Hi Irene*. He said.

Irene repeated the chicken's greeting and then smiled.

"Helen Keller!" said May. "Of course!"

Irene stood and stared at her palm, then shrugged and cracked her knuckles. Niniane and May sat cross-legged on the floor in front of Charlie, and he traced their names into their hands.

"This is great," said May finally. "But how are we going to deal with his crapping?"

*What is crapping?* Spelled Charlie.

Irene indicated the chicken's dropping.

*People don't crap?*

"Not where everyone can see," said Niniane.

"Or smell it," said Irene.

"Never mind that." said May. "What you have to learn, Charlie, is that there is a time and a place for everything. And the time and the place for that type of thing is definitely not in the living room."

Charlie took this in. He had become accustomed, in his short life, to the ease with which he had formerly relieved himself in the coop, where his productions were nothing compared to those of his more vigorous and well fed brothers and sisters. It had, in fact, seemed to him that depositing some waste was a good way to establish that he was indeed at home in this room, more so than he had been back in the henhouse.

The three women, as one, stared at him. They seemed to be waiting for some reply, yet none of them were holding out their palms to be written on. Charlie looked about for a napkin to hide his head under, but there was nothing. He flapped his wings.

Niniane sensed his agitation. "It's nothing personal, Charlie. It's just the way people are. I guess it's just another one of those ways that we're different. If we don't keep these things away from us... we get sick. I guess, in a way, we're not as strong as chickens. "

"It's not a big deal, really." May tentatively patted the chicken's head. "None of us are born knowing these things. We all have to learn."

After that was settled, Niniane took Charlie on a tour of the entire farmhouse, the first stop being the bathroom on the ground floor. "That's where we do our thing, Charlie," she explained. "That thing's called a toilet. We crap into that, and then we flush it-- we just flip that little knob here... and it all gets whooshed away."

*Where does it go then?* Asked Charlie, after Niniane explained to him what the word 'whooshed' meant.

"I don't know," said Niniane shortly. For the rest of the tour Charlie did not ask many more questions, although he did ask her if he could sleep on the gigantic, upraised, soft plane that she told him she slept on.

"I don't think so," she said. "Human beings need their privacy. Especially women."

It was decided that a corner of the downstairs living room would be made into a sort of sleeping/living area for Charlie. When Niniane had first taken him into that room, he had immediately expressed awe at the prospect afforded by the sliding glass door that opened out onto the back porch of the farmhouse. It looked like he could just hop over the threshold onto the back porch, he could sense that he somehow closed off from that

outside world that he could so clearly see. Niniane tapped on the glass with her finger. “Glass,” she said. “You can see through it, but you can’t go through it. It’s one of the smarter things that the human race has come up with.”

Charlie stretched out his neck and tapped the glass door with the tip of his beak. Its cool solidity reminded him of his eggshell. *It’s hard.* He said into Niniane’s hand.

“Yes,” she said. “So that nothing can get in that we don’t want in here.”

*Like what?*

Niniane gazed out the window for a moment. “All the things that humans can’t live with. It’s hard for us to live with any extremes, Charlie. We can’t take the heat, we can’t take the cold. We can’t take too much sun, we can’t take too much rain. We think we’re the most superior creatures on earth, Charlie, but really, we’re not. We’re just the best... or the first.. to come up with so many different ways to keep ourselves safe. When you think about it, everything in this house was invented just to keep us safe from everything that we didn’t invent...” Niniane turned away. “What I was thinking, Charlie, was that I can pull out one of the drawers from that old dresser in the garage, and put some straw in it, and you could sleep in that. We’ll put you over in the corner next to the fireplace, where it’s nice and cool, and...”

Niniane was pointing to the corner with her free hand, so it was awhile before Charlie could get his beak close enough to her hand to indicate that he wanted to say something.

*Can I sleep by the sliding glass door?*

Niniane’s eyebrows raised. “By the door? Well, I guess so. Why, Charlie? Do you want to be able to look out at night?”

*Yes.*

“But, Charlie, you’ll be asleep, won’t you? And, actually, we keep the curtains closed at night so that no one can see in.”

*What are curtains?*

Niniane pulled the cord and demonstrated the curtains for Charlie. They were very old curtains, from Niniane’s grandmother’s day, and somewhat embarrassing to her, their pattern consisting of tiny, fading cornucopias against a cream background. Charlie

was mesmerized by the sway of the fabric as it fell into stillness after meeting in the middle. Niniane set him on the floor.

Charlie stuck his head underneath the hem of the curtain and found himself looking out across the deck into the backyard of the farmhouse, which itself stretched out to end at a distant line of trees. He looked out for a long time, then backed out from under the curtain into what was now a very dim living room. Niniane, who was standing behind him with a fingernail between her teeth, sat on the carpet and held out her hand.

“I guess you won’t feel so cooped up in front of the door.” She said.

*I can see the trees.* Charlie said. Something about the sight of those trees, even though they were not exactly the same trees he could see from the coop, had a steadying effect upon him.

“Oh, yeah,” said Niniane, puzzled. “Well, I guess it’s okay. We keep the door bolted at night, anyway.” She blinked in the dim room. “So no one can get in, I mean.”

#

That evening, all four inhabitants of the farmhouse dined together at the round kitchen table. A place to the left of Niniane and opposite May had been set for Charlie; the chair being too low, he simply sat on the placemat and ate from a saucer of chicken feed, while Niniane (and also May and Irene; to avoid an argument on this first night) ate a vegetable casserole that Niniane had prepared and frozen earlier in the week. The conversation, of necessity, excluded Charlie, for whom it really was impossible to talk and eat at the same time. But Charlie at hardly anything, so absorbed was he in following the debate being parried between Niniane and May regarding how he could receive the most comprehensive education possible.

“A correspondence course,” said Niniane. “I already decided.”

May sighed. “Niniane, correspondence courses cost money.”

“They have them on the internet now! If you would just let me use the computer... it’s for a *reason*. I’m not going to just sit there and play games...”

“You know how I feel about all that web stuff...” May held up her hand. “It’s addictive. Now, my suggestion is that you simply read together...”

“That’s what we’ve *been* doing!”

May raised one eyebrow. “You know, it just occurred to me. How is it that you happened to be out in the chicken yard *reading*?”

Niniane swallowed. Why had she taken to spending so much time in the chicken yard? Why had she, from the first, become so attached to Charlie, before she had any inkling that he even noticed her? Was it just because she’d seen him hatch? “You told me you wanted me to take over morning feeding...” she said.

“Yes,” said May. “But what in the world were you doing out there *reading*? What were you reading, anyway?”

Niniane blushed and looked down at her plate. She hated to lie, but she would if she had to. “Different things,” she said. “And I wrote letters... since you won’t let me send any e-mail to anybody.”

“Hmm,” said May. “Well, Whatever you were doing, it must have been interesting.” She looked at Charlie and shook her head. It was still hard to believe that this was happening. A thousand baby chickens had passed through the farm over the years since it had come into her and Irene’s possession, and this little rooster perched on the edge of her kitchen table looked as mindless as any of them. “Anyway, as I was saying, I think the encyclopedia would be the best thing. Our set is old, but...”

“It’s more than old! It’s from 1973! And it’s missing D, and R, and...”

“LIKE I WAS SAYING, our set is old, and now that they have all those fancy computer ones these days, we can get a new set fairly cheap. I heard one advertised on the swap meet the other day, and for some reason I thought about getting it, and now that Charlie’s with us, I think I will. Consider it a welcome gift, Charlie...”

Niniane gritted her teeth. There was so much on the web that Charlie needed to see! She was going to take him to the PETA website, and the site for the Humane Society, and Greenpeace, and... there was so much she wanted him to see, so much she wanted him to know, so much that he could do to stop all of the terrible things that were happening to animals all over the world as soon as he knew enough and was ready enough and *angry* enough to *speak out*... And yet once again, May and Irene in their

stubborn complacency were standing in the way of real change... it was infuriating. An encyclopedia for god's sake! No other source of information that she could imagine even approached it for conventionality. It would be up to her to explain how things *really* are to Charlie.

As if she were reading Niniane's mind, May spoke into her thoughts soothingly. "Niniane, honey, if you would just think about it, you'd realize it's the best way. The encyclopedia isn't perfect, but it's comprehensive, and it's fairly unbiased, these days, I think, and it would give him a pretty good foundation of knowledge, and he could go from there with whatever he's interested in. Honey, you have to leave Charlie's education up to Charlie. You can't just teach him what you think he should learn..."

"I wasn't going to..."

"Niniane, I was seventeen once. And I thought I knew everything. Believe me. You can ask your mother sometime."

"Maybe I'm not like you." Niniane's said. "Maybe I don't think I know everything. I don't. But I do know right from wrong, and..."

"That's what you think," said May. "But you'll learn. In the meantime, think about what's best for Charlie."

"What's best for Charlie is that he doesn't get slaughtered. Like he would have if he hadn't started talking to me!"

At this, Charlie stopped eating, but no one noticed. He wondered what the word 'slaughtered' meant. Just the sound of it made his blood run colder.

May put down her fork. "Niniane, do you want to help this chicken learn more, or do you want to indoctrinate him?"

"You know the answer to that, May!"

"Well, can you think of any other way to let him learn at his own pace than giving him a set of encyclopedias?"

There was a long silence. "No," said Niniane finally.

"I'll be happy to buy him that set I heard about, then. It's a 2001 edition, and it's not missing anything."

"All right," said Niniane.

May looked at her niece fondly. "I'll call about it in the morning. In the meantime, why don't the three of you go watch some TV. That should be... instructive, at least. I'll clean up."

Then Irene and Niniane and Charlie went into the living room and sat themselves in front of the television for the next three hours. Charlie had many questions about what he saw, and much to think about as he lay in his hay-filled dresser drawer in front of the sliding glass door.

#

That first night in the farmhouse was a long and mostly sleepless one for Charlie. He spent much of it staring out of the sliding glass door at the darkness beyond, wondering what his mother and his brothers and sisters in the coop were doing, along with the few strutting roosters that ruled the chicken yard, and all of the other hens and their broods. He wondered if they even noticed that he was missing, if they felt anything. It seemed to him that they couldn't, for none of them, not even his mother, had ever expressed any emotion towards him other than irritation. In the chicken coop, except for those warm, eternal moments in Niniane's hand or lap, Charlie had always felt like he was in the way.

Here in the farmhouse, things were different... better even, but now that it was dark and he was left to himself, he felt terribly lonely. As he stared out the window he lifted his gaze to the distant stars and to the sickle moon that hung just above the dark line of the treetops. He had never had trouble sleeping in the coop. As fraught as his life had been with a sense of alienation and defeat, he had never experienced such absolute solitude as this. It was so still and hushed behind this glass. Even the sounds familiar to him that reached him from the outside, the shrill chirping of the crickets and the infrequent moan of the owl seemed muted by the barrier. He could hear nothing from the part of the house above his head, where the three women were sleeping. Had he expected that Niniane would be with him even in the night? He supposed he had. But she was upstairs in her massive bed, unreachable.

He left the glass door and returned to his dresser drawer with this sense of separation from Niniane embedded like a thorn in his mind. He remembered when he used to come to him in the chicken yard, her soft hands reaching into the coop and lifting him out into the sun as gently and naturally as if they were his own wings. He remembered resting in her lap, breathing in her scent, feeling the warmth of her body. Sometimes he would peer up at her face while she wrote her letters or read her magazine, (always out loud; for his edification, or so he came to believe) and at such times it seemed to him that she was the living essence of all beauty and warmth. Had he known what one was, he would have considered her to be some sort of goddess, a being of infinite generosity that had chosen him, alone of all his brood, to be her devotee. In his ignorance, however, she was simply Niniane, the One Who Lifted Him out of his Misery. But seeing her now, in what he knew to be her element, the farmhouse, among those Beings Much Like Herself whom she called May and Irene, was very unsettling, perhaps more so than leaving the coop was. In their company, aspects of his beloved were revealed to him that were far from her usual gentleness and generosity. As one member of their formidable trinity, he saw that she was rather contentious; that she felt superior in some way to them, though it was clear to see that she was the least powerful, in some intangible way, of the three. Seeing her with the 'aunts', Charlie found himself experiencing an emotion he was much later to identify as pity. Like him in the coop, with his brothers and sisters, Niniane with her aunts seemed incapable of expressing what was deepest within her, some kind of desperate need. He recalled how she had fought against the encyclopedias, which, for his part, he could hardly wait to see! They sounded a lot like the magazines she read, but better; according to May, these 'encyclopedias' would tell him *everything*. Even in the early days, earlier that week, he had sensed that the magazines had limited relevance to his life. He wondered if Niniane had been hoping to continue his education with those magazines. But she had mentioned something called the 'web,' something that the aunt called May clearly disapproved of. It bothered him that his beloved and her aunt did not agree. Charlie wanted to believe that Niniane was always in the right, as she had always been in the right in regard to him, or so it seemed. And yet, he thought, it had been the aunt called Irene that had hit upon the method of his writing with his beak into the hands of the ladies, a method he found, on many levels,

very appealing and superior to his previous method of writing in dirt. It was easier on the beak, for one thing. Niniane, he recalled, had just wanted to spread more dirt. And her sudden impatience with his asking a lot of questions was deeply hurtful to Charlie. How was he to learn, if he didn't ask, and who was he to ask, if not Niniane, his beloved? Charlie lay open-eyed in his makeshift bed and opened and closed his beak nervously. An old fear from earlier that afternoon was resurfacing in the dim living room. Had he, by speaking up, ruined everything? He could see that some of the things he asked made Niniane unhappy. Would he, in the end, lose his love by gaining knowledge? He resolved that this would not be so. Surely there was a way for him to delve into the magnificent world that had admitted him into itself through his acquisition of language without being unduly upsetting. If he could learn how to read and write, surely he could learn how to keep Niniane happy. He would apply himself to her well being, as she had applied herself to his, surely.

He closed his eyes; and to his mind came an image of Niniane, lying in her great bed upstairs, blissfully asleep. He felt almost as he was in the room with her, sharing her tranquility and beauty. Consoled with this fancy, Charlie drifted off to sleep.

#

Upstairs Niniane tossed and turned, unable to find comfort in her great, queen sized four-poster bed. The events of the day had simply been too overwhelming. More than once she had to beat down the urge to tiptoe downstairs and look at Charlie just to make sure that he was real, that it was all true. And yet, each time the temptation to reassure herself got too strong to resist, it would fade. She would sit up in bed and run her hands up and down her stubbly legs to ease their restless jiggling. Of course it was real, and in the end, given her convictions, why should it surprise her that a chicken could be intelligent? And who better for an intelligent chicken to reveal himself to than a person committed to animal rights? Despite her doubts about there being any sort of design to the Universe, the whole thing felt providential. 'Whoever's out there, thank you.' She whispered in the darkness, as her mind's eye-- half dreaming-- perceived,

seated upon a cloudy throne, a twinkling-eyed and distressingly male and old and bearded Deity.

## Chapter Six/ Old Mortality

Later on that week Charlie and Niniane sat on the front porch swing reading the 'C' volume of the Encyclopedia together.

"I never realized," Niniane shut the heavy book on her knees and looked down at Charlie, who was sitting on her lap. "How many interesting things begin with the letter 'C'. China. Communism. Cancer. Creativity. Corn. And, of course, Chickens."

*And Christianity.* Spelled Charlie into her hand. *That one was interesting.*

"I suppose so," said Niniane. "If you like that kind of thing. I, for one, don't."

*Why not?* Spelled Charlie.

"Religion," Niniane squared her shoulders. "Is one of those things that makes people get angry with each other for no reason."

*Why?*

"Because," said Niniane after some thought. "You just naturally want other people to believe what you believe."

Charlie gazed down the sloping driveway. All week now, Niniane and he had spent at least an hour or so of every morning leafing through the World Book, as prescribed by May. Although she didn't say so, Niniane was surprised at just how much she herself was learning from reading straight through the encyclopedia with Charlie, and they had only gotten so far as the first volume of 'C'! Charlie enjoyed these all too brief tutorials alone with Niniane, who, on account of a sudden heat wave, spent the afternoons swimming in the modest above ground pool that her grandfather had bought years ago specifically for her use during the summers.

*Maybe,* he spelled into her hand, after a period of silence in which the girl and the chicken watched a crow strut back and forth across the narrow gravel driveway, *Maybe I could look at that one a little more when you go swimming.*

"Look at that what?"

Charlie paused for a moment to recollect the exact spelling of the word. *That Christianity.*

Niniane scowled. "Charlie why would you want to read about *that*? It's depressing."

*Why?*

Niniane groaned. The word 'why,' especially since they had been reading the World Book, was cropping up in Charlie's conversation with maddening regularity.

"Oh, Charlie, I don't know." Niniane lifted Charlie from her lap, put him beside her on the porch swing, and stood up, leaving the C volume, open to the three and 1/2 page article on Christianity. "Go ahead and read it, then. I need a break anyway."

Charlie couldn't begin to read until the porch swing, which Niniane had so abruptly slipped out of, stopped swaying, but soon enough he was quite absorbed in the World Book's description of the fundamental forms and tenets of a phenomenon called Christianity.

#

One afternoon, following a dramatic thunderstorm which broke the heat wave, Niniane decided to take Charlie out across the east meadow to the tiny fenced in graveyard where many of her and May's Blattery ancestors lay. The little square of thinly grassed, sandy soil was irregularly studded with grave markers of differing sizes and shades of brown and gray. Those grave markers had always appealed to Niniane, positioned as they were like steadfast little soldiers in the middle of nowhere, without advance or retreat. In previous summers, whenever a particularly pensive mood would strike her, she would steal away to the graveyard and wander among the headstones like a restless spirit, familiarizing herself with the humble memorials of her mother's forebears, memorizing their names and later asking, either May or her mother, who these people were, who were in a sense as much a part of the farm as Irene and May. Three summers ago, driven by instinct, she had come to the graveyard alone just an hour or so after discovering that her first period had arrived. The solemn presence of those stalwart headstones, some of them ancient and slowly crumbling, seemed somehow to be an

appropriate witness to this inevitable, yet nonetheless jarring and not altogether pleasant new aspect of her life. In light of the extraordinary nature of this summer's developments, after the storm it occurred to Niniane that it would be proper to take Charlie to the Blattery family plot, and tell him what she knew of who and what was buried there.

The afternoon was warm and clear, with that rare, pungent freshness of air that follows a summer thunderstorm. Niniane walked among the stones with Charlie held snugly between her crooked elbow and side and told him what she knew of the people lying there.

"That tall headstone back there..." She pointed towards the back of the graveyard with her free hand. "...we'll go over close so you can see. That's my grandfather. Can you read his name?" She leaned forward so that the chicken could have a closer look at the carved letters, and placed her hand, open palm up, near his beak.

*Chester Elwood Blattery... spelled Charlie ...1908-1998 Devoted Husband and Father.*

Niniane nodded "Uh Huh."

*What's that other letter...* He inquired after a moment. *I've never seen that before?*

"What other letter, Charlie?"

*That one....* The chicken stretched out his neck to try to indicate the odd engraving. *It looks sort of like a 'G' inside an 'A'...?*

"Oh, that!" Niniane snorted. "It's some Masonic thing. Granddaddy was a Mason."

*What's a Mason?* Charlie asked, inevitably.

"To tell you the truth, Charlie, I honest to God don't know. It's something they only let men into. It's some kind of secret society."

Charlie said nothing, though he was intrigued.

"Granddaddy was a peculiar guy." Niniane mused. "He and May never got along. They were always fighting about something, even when May and Mama were little, Mama says Granddaddy always had a hard time getting May to do anything the way he wanted. May says that Granddaddy always had it in for her because he was a male

chauvinist and wanted a son, but Mama says it wasn't really that simple. She says that the reason May and Granddaddy never got along was because they were too much alike. But I don't think it's that simple, myself. I don't think May and Granddaddy are much alike at all, except for being opinionated. May's always been social... she likes doing things for other people, but Granddaddy was never like that. He stayed in his room all the time, watching T.V. Of course, he was sick most of the time I knew him..."

*You knew this Granddaddy?*

Niniane laughed. "Sure I did!" She lifted Charlie and set him to perch on the old man's tombstone and flexed her elbow. "I've gotta rest my arm a little. Yeah, Charlie, I knew Granddaddy. He didn't die until I was about eight. He was a grouchy old man. Especially when it came to May. I liked him though. I didn't understand, back then, how unfair it was that they wouldn't let May come home to the farm if she brought Irene. Of course, he wasn't all that much nicer to my mother, but at least Daddy was allowed to come here. Granddaddy's problem was that he thought all women should be just like Grandma Mattie..." Niniane, with a jerk of her head, indicated the smaller stone beside the one Charlie was perched upon that read, within a border of graven lilies "Mattie Anna Boyd Blattery Wife of Chester Blattery, born Aug. 31, 1913- Died May 1, 1994"

"That's Gramma Mattie, Charlie. You know, I never realized this before... but Gramma Mattie died on May's birthday!"

*Did you know her, too?*

Niniane took Charlie up again and bent him over to see her Grandmother's modest grave. "Yeah... I knew her a little. She died when I was five, so I don't remember her as well as I remember Granddaddy. She was nice, though." Niniane closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them Charlie was entranced by the unusual expression on her face: her lips were held in a faint smile, tipped just at the corners, and her eyes, usually quick and sharp, seemed soft and a bit faraway. Her voice took on a drawl that was reminiscent of, but much softer than Irene's. "I remember I used to sit on her lap and watch "Hee-Haw" with her, and every time Lulu would come on to sing, she's say "Now run get Gramma her box of Kleenex, Sugar. You know how Lulu always makes Gramma want to cry. She just sings such pretty songs about Jesus..."

Charlie held himself as still as a feather as Niniane spoke. He could not understand at all what she was talking about. Who was Lulu? What was Kleenex? He knew from the World Book article about Christianity who Jesus was, and he was surprised to hear Niniane mention that name so casually. But he did not want to spoil the moment by asking anything. He felt as if he were being handed something as delicate as an egg in this story of Niniane's about her grandmother. At the moment, it did not seem to matter that he didn't know every words exact meaning.

When Niniane spoke again her voice was more like her usual voice, and her expression was, is anything, sharper and more vigilant than ever. "But she did everything Granddaddy said, and he treated her just like a servant. It was disgusting. And then he had that stroke after she died. That's what a bad conscience will do to you, Charlie."

Charlie, again, did not know precisely what she meant by this last statement, but he kept his beak to himself. Niniane picked him up and they made there way towards the middle of the cemetery, to a waist high, rather unsteady looking headstone made of a kind of slatey looking rock that was dappled with some dry, whitish chalky substance. The wiggly letters engraved upon it were parchment thin and difficult for Niniane and impossible for Charlie to read. But Niniane knew it by heart. She recited it for Charlie.

"Here lieth Nimrod Blattery, Welshman." That's all it says. No one knows when he was born, or when he died. All we know was that he came from Wales, and that his name was Blattery, and that he cheated some Tuscarora Indians out of this land. So he's my mother's oldest ancestor in this country."

*Where is Wales?* Ventured Charlie.

"Oh, it's all the way across the ocean. It's in England, or near it, I think."

This Charlie understood, having come just that morning to the 'G' volume of the world book and reading all about 'Great Britain' a land across the ocean (whatever that was) from whence a number of poets came.

*Did you know him?*

Niniane snorted. "God, no, Charlie, he's been dead for centuries! For a long time, I mean. For about two hundred years, I think. You know, people only live to be about seventy years old. Well, Granddaddy lived to be about eighty-five. But no one gets much older than that, definitely.

*How long do chickens live?*

Niniane's elbow tightened a little. It squeezed Charlie a bit, but her voice betrayed nothing. "You know, I'm not sure Charlie. But I think it's about the same." She walked over to the next gravestone. "Rosa Delphinia Blattery." She read. "Granddaddy's sister. Now that's a really sad story, Charlie."

Facing this marker was a long, flat, rectangular slab of stone which rose about a foot out of the ground, and Niniane sat on this and set Charlie in her lap and told him the story of Polly Oxendine Blattery, her great-grandmother, and it was a story that Charlie thought was very sad indeed, even though he did not understand many of the details, even though Niniane made an effort to explain those concepts that Charlie, in his innocence, would not yet have encountered in experience or in the World Book.

"She was just a little baby when she died." said Niniane. "See?" She pointed to the dates on the gravestone, then read them aloud. "Born December 12, 1919. Died September 23, 1920. Budded on Earth to Bloom In Heaven, it says under that." Niniane shook her head. "That's too young for anyone to die. She wasn't even a year old." She looked at Charlie, but did not offer her hand.

Charlie wouldn't have known what to say even if he had been able to say anything. Death to him was still a great enigma; from his reading in the World Book he had come across it enough to associate it with that feeling of impending, inescapable annihilation that had come over him in the coop those first few days of his life when he had realized, in that wordless, instinctual way he had of perceiving information before he had acquired human language, that he could not compete with his brothers and sisters for what he needed in order to survive. But it was yet unclear to him whether or not death was the absolute end of everything. The attitude that human beings appeared to have toward it seemed to him much like the attitude they obviously had toward the deposition of their bodily wastes; it was something they never liked to speak about, except when confronted with its reality, and then their comments and the expressions of their enviably mobile countenances would range from grave seriousness to panic to calm sadness to hilarity. This was true, he was discovering, not only of the women of the farm, but of the people he saw every night on the device they called the TV.

“It’s really sad,” Niniane said again, in a voice curiously flat. “Aunt May told me about it the summer after Granddaddy died. I had never heard about it before that. But what happened was, this little baby was killed in a hurricane that came through here.” She shaded her eyes and looked out over the horizon in the direction of the storm that had passed over them earlier. She shivered and looked down at Charlie, who had his head cocked jauntily, one eye focused intently on her face. “A hurricane is a big storm. Like the one we had this afternoon, with lots of thunder and lightning and rain. But a hurricane is like a thousand times worse, because it’s so windy. The wind can be strong enough to....” she looked all around her as if in search of an example. “...to blow the whole farmhouse apart. A hurricane can blow away anything.”

Gripped by the precariousness of existence, Charlie blinked.

Niniane swallowed and continued. “Anyway, May said that Granddaddy and his brother and their father were in town for something when the storm hit... they didn’t have weather reports then, so they didn’t realize how bad a storm was on the way- and that Granddaddy’s mother was by herself with the baby and got scared when the windows started rattling and things started falling down in the house, so she ran outside with the baby, and the winds snatched the baby right out of her arms and dashed it up against a big maple tree in the front yard. May said that one of the neighbors came by after the storm to check on things and found Granddaddy’s mother trying to chop down that tree. She had the baby set in a carriage right beside her just like it was asleep. That neighbor tried to stop her and she got him right in the shoulder with the axe. He almost died himself.”

Niniane closed her eyes for a moment. From the first time she had heard of this grisly incident, one of many in the history of her mother’s family, it had held for her a peculiar fascination. Though she had no idea what it would be like to be in the middle of a hurricane, and even though there was not, among the hundreds of family photographs and portraits in the farmhouse of the manifold members of her mother’s family, any likeness of either her grandfather’s mother or the hapless baby Rosa, the scenes of the storm and its terrible aftermath were as vivid for her as any of her own personal memories. She saw the roiling dark clouds and buffeting winds, she heard the rattling of the windows and the clunk of falling objects, she felt the panic of the woman left alone with a little baby in a house that must have seemed as if it were moments away from total

collapse, she saw the screaming baby, soiled in its terror and glistening with rain, slipping out of her mother's grip like a too tightly held ball and flying to its death against the merciless trunk of the massive shade tree. For some reason Niniane could picture, with a terrible clarity, the baby's brains clinging like gray lichen to the soggy brown bark of the maple. She could picture her great-grandmother, rising from her own inevitable collapse to look upon that terrible signature of life's frailty and nature's inhuman might, could see her snatch her baby from the ground, wrap her in the apron she was wearing, then disappear into the farmhouse; then, when the storm had passed she saw her great grandmother stride out to the tree, pushing the stroller with one hand and brandishing the axe in the other. Not even the features of this ancestor whom she had never seen were hidden from Niniane, for, whenever she brought to her mind the scene, they were, for some reason, identical to those of Niniane's own mother, Thelma Westvane, and, as usual, whenever Niniane realized this, she opened her eyes forced herself to think of something else.

"They took her away- Granddaddy's mother- after that. She died in the State Asylum in Raleigh." Niniane said this quickly, her voice once again flat. She stood up and took a deep breath. The sun was high in the sky above them now, even though it was late afternoon by the watch on Niniane's wrist, and Niniane's t-shirt and cotton skirt were clinging to her back and legs in the damp heat. "I think I need a good long swim." She said brightly. "Do you want to come along and watch me Charlie? Or do you want to go inside and read?"

Charlie bounded up and down in her arms. They were walking out of the cemetery now, down the hill to the farmhouse. Once they were over the graveyard fence, Niniane stood still a moment so he could answer her.

*I don't feel like going inside.* He said. In truth, his beloved's unease over the tragic tale that she had told had transferred itself completely to Charlie, and he really didn't feel like being by himself that afternoon if he could help it.

## Chapter Seven/ Dillis

On the way back to the house from the little graveyard, Niniane pointed out a low, wide stump in the front lawn about a half dozen yards away from the driveway. “That was where that tree used to be.” She said. Charlie did not reply, but waited for her to move on into the house. But she stood there, looking at that stump as if she could see a ghost sitting on it, for what seemed to Charlie to be a long time. The sun was high and fierce, and Charlie, clasped high off the ground between Niniane’s warm arm and side was beginning to feel the need for shade. After awhile Niniane averted her gaze from the remains of that fatal tree whose roots still reached deep into the earth and would until the end of days. They went inside and she released Charlie into the cool dark embrace of the farmhouse as she set him down in the living room to wait while she changed into her bathing suit.

Charlie could hear May humming tunelessly in the tiny office down the hallway as she tapped inconsistently on a keyboard. Irene, he supposed, was out in the fields, or in town, doing whatever it was she did in those mysterious places that seemed to be her particular domain.

Charlie sat contentedly gazing out the sliding glass door. He had come to love the three women that took care of him so dearly that it occurred to him, in that moment, that it would be terrible if somehow, things were to change.

Just as he thought this, Niniane came downstairs and scooped him up. She tugged at the handle of the sliding glass door and then the two of them outside in the heat. She strode across the deck, down the stairs and loped over the grass to the pool, then climbed the stairs unto its narrow deck. She laid out the towel she’d brought along and set Charlie on it, then jumped into the pool with first a squeal, then a shiver, then a moan. Totally wet, she smoothed her hair back over her head and glided over to the rim of the pool.

“Hey, Charlie?” she said with an uncharacteristic note of supplication. “You know, it’s been so wonderful having you around that I totally forgot that I told Dillis he

could come and see me here. I didn't even think of it, but there was a letter from him on my dresser when I went upstairs. It must have just got here today. I don't know what I'm going to tell him." she looked away, and Charlie could see her take one side of her glistening lower lip between her front teeth.

She sighed. "No matter what I say, he's going to think something's wrong. I mean, before I got here, I made him promise to ask off work and everything..."

Niniane folded her arms on the rim of the pool and rested her cheek on them. She seemed to be having a difficult time meeting Charlie's eye, or extending her palm for him to write upon. "I wish I could think of something to tell him so that he won't think... so that he won't get the wrong idea..."

Charlie's features, incapable of any significant range of expression, felt, for the first time since he had learned to read, properly composed. At that moment the chicken was gripped by a passion as cold and soulless as the animal passion for food. He would not share this home he had found, against all the laws of nature, with anybody. He would surely die if this Dillis were to ever intrude upon his haven. It must not be.

Hanging on the edge of the pool, Niniane kicked her feet limply in the water and hazarded a glance at Charlie. His beak was pointing straight ahead, his eyes gazing off in either direction, and she wondered for the first time, what he could see that way. Did he see both sides, or did he have to focus on one thing, leaving whatever he was not at the moment concentrating on in the periphery of his attention? She would have to ask him some time. But not now. "Charlie?" she said.

He turned his head and looked at her out of his right eye. He opened and shut his beak. She held out her hand, palm up.

*Tell him to come.* The chicken scratched.

Niniane looked him in the eye. Was she imagining that he was applying a bit more pressure to her palm than usual?

"Are you sure, Charlie? I promise you, he can be trusted."

*Sure.* He scratched, a bit more gently.

Niniane knew from the faintness of this last word that the chicken was suffering. She reached up and put her damp hand on his newly smooth, feathered head. "I love you, Charlie. I hope you know that."

What is love? Thought Charlie, having never heard the word before. But he knew even as he asked this silent question that love was the empty wrench in his gut that he was now feeling.

#

In the days to come, life on the farm settled into a comfortable routine. Charlie rose with the sun, far earlier in the morning than any of the other inhabitants of the farmhouse, and usually spent that solitary portion of the day looking out the sliding glass door with all the absorption of a human being watching TV. The view was, for him, at once exciting and soothing. He liked to watch as colorful flighted birds fluttered among the feeders that hung from the trees in the backyard, though it disturbed him a bit to see them pull worms from the ground. He marveled at the deftness of the squirrels who scampered up and down and across the backyard trees, and he often wondered what all these creatures of the yard who lived so close to the farmhouse and yet who seemed to be, unlike his own kind, free, thought about, if anything. Sometimes he would find himself watching the squirrels as they twitched and curled their agile tails so spasmodically, and he would wonder if perhaps those erratic, peculiar motions might have some squirrelly meaning.

Usually May was the first of the women to come downstairs, and she would always greet Charlie with a sing-song 'good mor-ning!' He would follow her into the kitchen and perch on the counter to watch as she made breakfast. Into the midst of this scene would arrive Irene, scowling and uncommunicative until she had her coffee in front of her. Niniane was always the last to come downstairs. She liked to have a shower before starting the day.

Following breakfast was generally Charlie's time for studying the World Book with Niniane. Lunch was a casual affair. Usually Niniane made a sandwich or salad for herself and fixed a bowl of seed for Charlie after they finished reading. Then Niniane would either go outside to be by herself for a while, or go into town with Irene on some errand. Later in the afternoon Niniane almost always went swimming. She claimed that the water and the exercise invigorated her and cleared her thinking, and after awhile

Charlie had to agree that the effect that the water had on her was salutary. He almost always went with her to perch on the poolside as she swam, watching her and, he had to admit to himself, hopelessly fantasizing. The sight of her moving herself with such mastery in that expanse of water was enough to make Charlie dizzy with adoration and to constrict his small chest with not a little envy. How he wished he were what they called a man! At these times he would ask himself whether or not he would make the change, if such an opportunity was offered, even if the price to pay would be his obvious singularity. To be a human among humans, free from the bonds of a form that was a contradiction to his emotional needs! He had never seen a male human in person before, but he had seen many on TV, and for the most part they seemed to him to be creatures possessed of not only the freedom and energy and generosity of the three women of the farm, but also of a certain unconscious density which he, Charlie, felt lacking in himself. Men, it seemed to Charlie, were driven by an inner force that enabled them, like his brothers and sisters back in the coop, to succeed over and against one another, but without the bleak single-mindedness of the “normal” chicken. Men could boast of their superiority. Chickens could only achieve theirs-- or not. With the prospect of encountering, in Dillis, a victory over himself, Charlie felt keenly his own perceived and familiar inferiority.

Whenever Charlie thought of the boyfriend he became ruffled with jealousy. He had seen enough of the teen magazines to know that the word “boyfriend” implied a physical closeness he wished-- however hopelessly-- that Niniane would reserve for him. Niniane’s having a male friend of her own species was understandable, even inevitable, but still, maddening and depressing. --Why,-- He asked himself, --doesn't she forget about him and just like *me*?--

Charlie realized even as he thought these thoughts that he was being unreasonable. A chicken, such as he was, albeit one with a capacity for abstract thought, was no substitute for a man, at least not when it came to certain things. --I'm inadequate...-- Charlie thought to himself during these poolside meditations --and no one will ever love me the way Niniane loves.. (Charlie tried not to dignify his rival with a name)... that boy. I wish I'd never hatched.

Most of the time, though, Charlie had to admit that he was very glad he had hatched. The world of human discourse was full of marvels and possibilities, even for a chicken. He took to words and their ability to express for and convey to him those ineffable and yet terribly vital things called ideas just as his brothers and sisters had taken to grubs and seeds, with a kind of inborn, implacable appetite. Unbeknownst to the three women, he was, in quiet moments, spending much of his time puzzling over questions that in time he would come to recognize as existential. Why was he here? Why was anybody? He knew he was unique among chickens in his ability to make himself understood to the humans, but what did it all mean? Niniane had made it clear that she believed he was supposed to speak out against the widespread human practice of eating other animals, but as much as Charlie wished to agree with his beloved about everything, her did not share her conviction that the eating of animal flesh was intrinsically evil. Didn't chickens eat grubs and seeds and other living things? Wouldn't anything, if it came down to a matter of continued existence or extinction, eat anything? That life was lived at the expense of life Charlie knew from his experience as the smallest, weakest hatchling. And, grateful as he was to Niniane for saving him and to the aunts for harboring him, what Charlie desired more than anything was to somehow be able to contribute to *their* well being. In fact, the idea, which occurred to him more and more frequently during his long nights alone in the living room after the women had gone up to sleep, of being eaten by Niniane was mysteriously thrilling.

Niniane, he knew, would be horrified to imagine that he had such thoughts. But his endless questions regarding the nature and purpose of everything kept his hungry mind occupied during those times—and they were frequent and lengthy—when there was no one to talk to or read with him. He knew the women had other concerns than him, and though this made him feel a bit sad, it drove him to explore the phenomenon of his own existence with a peculiar intensity. Ultimate questions as to the meaning of life became his concern, and these questions kept him busy and eager to learn more about those aspects of life that humans had always claimed a monopoly upon. His attention became more and more drawn to those articles in the World Book that touched upon religious or philosophical matters, and while he knew that Niniane was sure to become impatient with his preoccupation with impracticalities, he sometimes felt he had an ally in Irene, who,

although she never said much, had an air of reflection that drew Charlie to her. One night after supper, while she and he were sitting together at the table while Niniane removed their plates and May did the cleaning, he'd asked Irene what a soul was. She had replied, with uncharacteristic promptness.

"It's what makes you you and me me."

Despite what came later, it did not occur to Charlie to question, after that, whether or not he had a soul.

Charlie realized that watching Niniane was a way in which he mortified himself, engendering weakness and strength simultaneously. After finishing her laps, Niniane would towel herself dry, then, with her towel wrapped tight enough around her long brown hair to pull the corners of her eyes up into a fetching slant, she would come out and sit beside Charlie, dangling her feet into the water, her damp, slim hand set palm upward at her side in case Charlie wanted to say anything. At these moments Charlie would often find his own troubled self soothed by her air of contentment. In her relaxed presence he could think about those other claims upon his imagination; namely, religion and philosophy.

As for religion, or more specifically Christianity, much of what he read under that subject heading in the World Book encyclopedia did not make a lot of sense to him. The article was full of vocabulary that seemed specialized and remote and somehow purposefully puzzling, such as the word 'incarnation' and the never clearly explained notion of the 'trinity.' But the story of the young man who had performed miracles, the last but not least among them being his own resurrection from the dead, had an appeal for Charlie that he could not explain. Something about the whole thing was deeply charming, yet at the same time rather forbidding. One afternoon at the poolside he'd asked Niniane if she was familiar with any of these concepts, but she had only rolled her eyes back in her head and disappeared under the chlorinated water for quite a while. Charlie knew that the subject aroused in her a disdain rather more immediate than any she had previously displayed; and that to find out more about this strange religion he would have to get hold of a book called a "bible" to read, and go to a place called a "church." There had also been mentioned, in the article, some sort of activities, called "sacraments" that he would have to do, but those, evidently were secondary to a

knowledge and acceptance of the original story. How he was going to begin to find out more about this compelling subject without annoying Niniane, especially when she found it so clearly obnoxious, Charlie did not know. He tried to put the subject out of his mind altogether, it's incompatibility with his separate and equal desire to make Niniane happy in all things was distressing, but the images and questions continued to prickle his mind like a crown of thorns. It seemed there were longings within his tiny (but rapidly expanding) chicken breast that even his love for Niniane could not fulfill. Charlie spent many hours at night brooding in his drawer on these things, at times not falling asleep until the wee hours of the morning when he would awaken, before all the women in the house, to the raucous sound of a rooster- who may well have been his biological father-crowing.

Traditionally, the three women were accustomed to spending their summer nights leisurely, chatting and often playing cards on the kitchen table into the small hours of the morning. The arrival of Charlie did not, after the first few days of his tenancy in the farmhouse, change that. Since it was impossible for Charlie to hold his own cards, he did not play. But he liked to sit at his place at the table watch, and listen as the ladies played their game of rummy. In this way his knowledge of them grew without his having to endlessly cross their palms with questions.

#

Dillis arrived late in the afternoon, when May was setting the table for supper; while Charlie, who was feeling too apprehensive to be by himself, sat on the countertop and observed her cooking.

"I guess that's the boy," sighed May as the sound of a car crunching up the long, steep gravel driveway reached them in the kitchen. "He would haver to get here early."

Almost immediately, Niniane came running in, breathless, her hair still damp from her swim that day. "It's Dillis!" She yelled. "Charlie, come out there with me!"

She swept Charlie up with a swiftness that made him dizzy.

With her free hand Niniane grabbed her aunt as well. "You too, May. We should all be together. Where's Irene?" She did not wait for an answer, but ran outdoors, squeezing Charlie tight.

May sighed, but she followed Niniane and Charlie out the screen door to the driveway.

Dillis was climbing out of a small, dirty olive green car. He was holding an overstuffed rucksack in both hands, and his thin biceps stood out in strained relief. He faced the three inhabitants of the farm, his lips parted and raised over small, irregular teeth. He was squinting as if he was staring into the sun; and in fact, the sun shone directly in his eyes, as it was in the act of setting and he was facing west. Facing Dillis from the porch, Charlie could see the dying sun reflected by the boy's round spectacle lenses as two identical shimmering orange yolks.

"Well," the interloper said, though he still could see nothing but the setting sun, "so this is it!"

Niniane handed Charlie to May, and ran over to where Dillis stood, blindly beholding them, and embraced him with such vigor that they fell against the side of the dusty car. They kissed one another in greeting. Charlie, from the height of May's arms, where he'd been deposited, looked away.

#

At supper that night, Charlie found it hard not to stare at Dillis, even though he was determined not to like him, and even more determined not to let on. Dillis looked nothing like Charlie had imagined him, nothing like the human males he had seen on TV. Dillis seemed, in comparison to the three women, to be somehow underdeveloped. His frame was very slight, like a hatchling chicken, but he was tall. His glasses lent him an expression of astonishment that was neither pleasant nor unpleasant to behold, but which gave Charlie the impression, vague and shamefully heartening, that at the root of the boy's affable, goofy manner, lay a willful stupidity. Charlie also thought Dillis' voice was strange, much higher than those male voices he had heard on television, yet with a droning, moaning quality.

By that time, Dillis' dramatic introduction to Charlie had taken place. Just after the boy arrived, he'd been shown to the living room, which was to serve, as it did Charlie, as his bedroom. They all sat down and waited for Irene to come in from the fields. When she arrived, she greeted Dillis with a one sided smile and an brief, strong handshake, then excused herself to take a shower, which she desperately needed, having spent the hot afternoon shoveling silage. May excused herself to start preparing their supper, and once they were out of the way Niniane asked Dillis to sit down on the sofa beside Charlie and hold open his hand, palm up.

"I've been meaning to ask why you're carrying a chicken around," he said. "I thought you might be getting ready to fry it for me."

At this Niniane turned pale. "Oh my God, Dillis!" she said. "That's not funny!"

Taken aback by her sudden gravity, Dillis sat down on the edge of the sofa cushion.

"Dillis, you really can't joke around like that. You don't know what you're saying. Now, I'm going to ask you to do something," she said, stroking the small chicken's head with one finger, "and I need for you to trust me. What you're about to witness, Dillis, is something truly amazing, so get ready. This is going to blow your mind. Are you ready?"

There being no answer to such a question in such circumstances, Dillis nodded, bewildered. He regarded the chicken, and the chicken ducked its head.

"Okay," Niniane took a deep breath. " Dillis, this chicken is called Charlie. Now, I want you to ask Charlie a question."

Dillis blinked and looked up at Niniane whose eyes twinkled. It hit him then. Niniane had trained this chicken to perform a trick. He grinned. It was unlike Niniane to amuse herself with animals. Even though she'd had a dog all her life until its death of old age the year before, Dillis knew she now questioned the ethics of keeping animals as pets. Maybe, he thought, being on the farm has been a reality check for her. Maybe she would finally mellow out some about her vegan business. Her letters, though, hadn't indicated any change in her way of seeing things. At any rate, if Niniane wanted show him a trick, he was more than willing to play along! Why not? He leaned forward.

"You want me to ask him a question? What is he, psychic?" He slapped his knee with his open palm.

"I'm serious," said Niniane. "Ask him a question. Remember, he's called Charlie."

"Charlie Chicken?" Dillis rolled his eyes behind his glasses, but he laid his hand down, palm up. He looked again at May, who smiled, but not so much *for* him as *at* him, he realized later.

"Go on." said Niniane softly, setting Charlie on the cushion beside him. "I'll explain everything, don't worry. Just ask him a question."

Dillis looked at her for a long time, grinning, then blushing, then casting his gaze away from her silent, solemn, patient one. "All right." he said, after a long time. "I'll ask the chicken a question."

He took a breath. "Charlie..." he said. "Why did the chicken cross the road?"

Charlie did not know what to say. He looked up at Niniane, who groaned. "Be serious." She said.

Dillis sighed and lifted his hand out of the reach of Charlie's beak to reach for Niniane's hand. She grabbed and laid it back down on the sofa cushion, palm up. "Go ahead, Charlie," she said. "Just say anything."

Charlie knew better than to scratch what he would like to scratch into the boy's palm. *Go away!* was what he really wanted to say. Instead he lowered his beak and scratched, *Hello*, rather tersely.

It took awhile for it to register with Dillis that the scratches in his palm were meant to form letters. Charlie had to repeat his performance three times before the boy's brow wrinkled, and his jaw slackened and he gaped at Niniane. "No way!" he said. "You taught this chicken how to write! That's fucking incredible!"

Niniane smiled. She could tell he didn't get it, not yet. He thought it was some trick. "Go on, Charlie," she said. "Keep your hand still," she said to Dillis.

Charlie suddenly felt terribly weary. Gathering all the moral and physical strength his little body possessed, he lowered his head and pressed his beak into the boy's rather sweaty palm. *Niniane loves you very much*, he scratched.

This time Dillis' lips moved as the letters formed in his palm, and as comprehension dawned, he looked up from the chicken to Niniane, his eyes widening with the beginnings of panic. This was not something that Niniane would ever say to him, much less teach a chicken to say. What this chicken was saying, he was saying on his own. He looked back down at the chicken, and snatched his palm away from the reach of its beak.

*I'm glad you're here*, Charlie was about to say, however insincerely, but there was no way to, as Dillis, at that point, began waving his arms in the air, all the while staring at Niniane. His teeth were chattering. Niniane took the boy's hands, held them still between her own, spoke directly into his frantic eyes. Charlie had never seen Niniane behave like this, so collected and patient. It was as if to her at this moment nothing was more important than reassuring Dillis that in this initial panic, in this gradual coming to grips with the unexpected and unbelievable, he was not alone.

At the dinner table that night, Charlie ate very little, and was uncomfortably conscious of an urge peck Dillis with his beak.

#

Dillis was to sleep, like Charlie, in the living room. Wide awake in his drawer, Charlie waited impatiently for sleep while the young man breathed heavily, stretched out on the longer section of the L-shaped sofa which faced the television. He was hidden completely from Charlie's view, but Charlie could not tune out the sound of his deep, irregular breathing and the occasional minute snores and groans that issued from the boy. Eventually Charlie rose and trotted across the room and around the couch to look at him.

Dillis lay there, covered up to his chest with a light, pale blue bed sheet. His mouth was slightly open and his eyes loosely shut, giving the impression of that most profound relaxation that follows upon and in a certain sense compliments, extreme agitation. Charlie thought he looked different without his glasses on; without them his face laid bare an infant quality.

Charlie stretched his neck and inspected Dillis' spectacles, which lay, unfolded, lenses down, on the wooden coffee table. Charlie understood that the spectacles helped

the boy to see. May had a pair that she wore on a chain around her neck and used during card games or when reading the newspaper.

Charlie suddenly became possessed of an urge to snatch those glasses up off the table with his beak and hide them somewhere, or better yet break them into a million pieces. The prospect of his somehow incapacitating Dillis suddenly seemed so possible and so inviting that Charlie was in that moment stunned by the sensation of power that welled up in his tiny chest. If I told her, Charlie thought, thinking of Niniane, that I didn't like him... or if I told her that he did or said something bad to me, she'd make him go away.

Charlie stepped back from within reach of the boy's glasses and closed his own eyes. Before his mind's eye a scene played out in which Niniane, with the expression and righteous might of an enraged Valkyrie, threw Dillis' flailing body from the front stoop of the farmhouse onto the hood of his vehicle.

Charlie felt a chill in the air, and on the couch the boy's slight body twitched, then soothed itself. Charlie wondered what would happen if he woke Dillis up. He imagined that Dillis, who, at least at dinner seemed accustomed to having a chicken there who was a part of the general conversation, would still be quite nervous if faced with having to talk to the chicken one on one. Charlie found he did not want to disturb this rather pitiful human right now. Regarding the boy, he tried to imagine what it was about him that might be extraordinary. He, Charlie, was unique among his species, he knew that. But what set this young man apart from all the others for Niniane?

Dillis licked his lips, wrinkled his forehead, moaned. Charlie recalled the unseemly excitement and disbelief and outright panic with which Dillis had reacted to the evidence of Charlie's writing ability. It had taken the boy a full half hour before he could bring himself again to offer his palm to Charlie. Even through supper and the card game afterwards he had persisted in periodically staring at Charlie through those rather smudged spectacles and muttering, "Unreal!"

Niniane and May and Irene were shocked by me-- Charlie realized. But he's different. He's-- Charlie looked at the floor and searched for the word. He's *stunned*. He can't believe me even though he's seen me. He can't take it all in.

Charlie trotted back to his own cushion, then rose and looked out the glass door at night on the farm. In truth, the boy's panic and his lingering astonishment had made the chicken himself feel rather unreal. It was, he'd known since the first time he'd written to Niniane, no fun when someone can't believe you're real.

## Chapter Eight/ Spiritual Cramp

Dillis joined Niniane and Charlie at their regular, inviolable reading the next morning after breakfast. He still seemed shaken. He seemed unable to keep from staring at Charlie over the breakfast table as Charlie ingested his feed the only way he could, with his head thrown back and with his throat expanding and contracting in subcutaneous motion. These incessant, furtive glances irritated Charlie.

However, with Niniane sitting between them on the back porch glider, Charlie felt less absorbed by his own emotions than by his lessons. That morning they were well into the 'J' volume of the encyclopedia, which Charlie found to be one of the more interesting. The article entitled Japan, read the day before, started Niniane on a tangent in which she recounted for Charlie the U.S. policy of detaining American citizens of Japanese extraction in internment camps during the Second World War. This digression had led to a further one in which Charlie was made aware of the practice of slavery on the very land upon which the two of them presently sat. From thence a discussion of the categorization of humans into phenotypic groups called 'races' had taken place, until Niniane's throat had gone quite dry.

She opened the encyclopedia volume on her thighs and turned to Dillis. "Now." She said. "We're already up to the letter 'J'. Yesterday, we read the article on Japan, and I told Charlie all about the internment camps during World War Two."

"Okay," Dillis said. He still could not get over the fact that the chicken could read and write. But having slept a deep and dreamless sleep the night before, he felt a bit more mentally limber. Niniane's customary didactic tone restored to Dillis a sense of normality even in the midst of the impossible. Chickens might read, the earth might freeze in its orbit, but Niniane would always be the same.

"So," he peered across her at the chicken. "This is how you learned to read?"

*Sort of.* Charlie scratched. He noted again the curious smell that Dillis' skin had, a slightly sour, sharp, not unpleasant odor utterly different from the women's' fresher,

less overpowering one. *I couldn't have learned on my own though. Niniane would read out loud, and somewhere along the way I made the connection.*

"Why don't the rest of the chickens read? Would they, if we read out loud to them?"

Both Niniane and Dillis looked at Charlie. Dillis' hand was steady, waiting.

*No.* Scratched Charlie.

"Why not?" asked Dillis.

Without a pause, Charlie scratched. *They're not like me.*

Dillis repeated aloud what the chicken had scratched into his palm.

"Charlie!" Niniane's voice rose as if the chicken had pecked her. "How can you say that? They haven't had your opportunities!"

Charlie raised his head and wished ardently for someplace to hide it.

Niniane placed her little finger under his beak and lifted his gaze. "Charlie," she said. "You can't be the only chicken... out of God knows many in the world... who can learn to read. If one chicken can do it, every chicken can do it, under the right, humane conditions... don't you think? What's the matter with you!"

Charlie's head hung. Dillis stretched out his hand. "Maybe Charlie's a savant. Is that what you are, Charlie?"

Charlie's curiosity got the better of his discomfort. *What's a savant?*

Dillis considered. He wasn't exactly sure. But he had heard the word applied to people on television who had inexplicable abilities. Most of them were in some way retarded, which made their talents seem all the more remarkable. Dillis said as much, omitting the factor of retardation.

*That's it!* Scratched Charlie. *That's what I am.*

Dillis repeated this.

"That is the most arrogant thing I've ever heard you say, Charlie!" cried Niniane. "What makes you think the other chickens couldn't learn to read if somebody took the time teach them? What makes you so different?"

Charlie's feathers ruffled at the heat in Niniane's words. She had been annoyed with him before, but never angry. He wondered what he could say to take back what he said, even though he felt, deep down, that he was right. Still, how *did* he know that the

others couldn't learn to read if they were taught? The truth was, there was no reason why they should not, other than his own sense that no chicken, including himself, was capable of acquiring any ability upon which its personal survival did not depend. Charlie's survival had depended upon his being able to communicate with that Being which had delivered him from a world in which he could not compete. Not every chicken, and certainly none that he knew, possessed that same need. Why should they? They got along fine without communicating anything other than the primacy of their drives. It seemed clear to Charlie that his ability to communicate and his need to do so were essentially the same thing. But he could not imagine how to put this feeling into words for Niniane. Yet his need to appease her wrath was great. *I don't know*. He scratched.

She rolled her eyes and repeated his words to Dillis. "He's not usually like this." She said.

Dillis reached over and stroked Charlie's neck. "Aw, give him a break. He's not saying he's any *better* than the rest of them... he's just different. Right Charlie?"

Charlie, astonished to have such an advocate in his rival, stood stock still for a moment, then pumped his head forward with affirmative vigor.

Dillis smiled. "See?" he said. He leaned back in the glider, laced his hands behind his head and stretched his long legs with the air of having vanquished an opponent. "See, Niniane! You can't accept diversity."

There was a sound like a gunshot as Niniane slammed the encyclopedia closed. She stood up, clenched her teeth, then took a deep breath, turned, and regarded Dillis and Charlie coolly. "Since you *guys* know so much," she said. "I guess you don't need me."

With that she tossed the 'J' volume of the encyclopedia to Dillis, who caught it just before it would have landed, pointedly, on his crotch. Struggling with the recalcitrant sliding glass door, Niniane disappeared into the farmhouse, leaving the boy and the chicken alone on the back porch glider. Dillis, his grin faded but remaining, placed the encyclopedia on the floor and drew the chicken into his lap. "Yikes," he said.

Charlie continued to stare through the sliding glass door through which his beloved had passed, but nothing could be seen in the dimness of the house. Dillis followed the chicken's gaze and patted its little head. "She'll be all right," he assured his agitated new feathered friend. "She gets that way some times."

For a moment Charlie felt disloyal, then he felt betrayed. What if Niniane went back to the coop, found another chicken, (most likely one of his own horrible brothers) and succeeded in teaching *it* how to read! Even though something in him was sure every other chicken would only ignore Niniane's attempt to improve their comfortable lot, the mere idea of her making such an overture to them was more painful than he could bear. He wilted onto Dillis lap and his head rested against the skinny young man's prominent ribs. Dillis, he saw clearly now, did not mean to be his rival, and would be sorry to learn that he was. In the midst of his agony, Charlie's dormant affection Dillis quickened. His only rival for the love of Niniane was her own indomitability, which he would not, for his own happiness, exchange. It occurred to him that his life was doomed to futile, hopeless devotion. Beneath him, Dillis' thin body shifted restlessly.

"Sorry, man," the boy said. "My leg's going to sleep." He set Charlie on the glider beside him, then picked up the encyclopedia. "Well," he said. "Let's see if I could make it as a chicken teacher."

Charlie pumped his neck gratefully. Dillis opened the book to a random page in the middle, and began to read aloud, hesitating often, and mispronouncing many words.

#

Niniane spent the afternoon in her room alternately lying down on her bed and sitting up on it, and trying unsuccessfully not to dwell on the morning's argument. It wasn't that she was convinced that any other chicken could read and write- and if she were honest, she knew she would not really want another chicken to be as special as Charlie- but the interference from Dillis was infuriating. From Dillis this kind of cheek was unfortunately becoming par for the course, but it was not the kind of attitude she wanted Charlie exposed to.

She sighed. Dillis had been so laid back—so *reasonable* before he decided he didn't need to finish high school.

Sitting lotus-style on her bed, Niniane closed her eyes and tried not to think about it. But Charlie had been so adamant! His certainty that he was the only one lacked—well, *humanity*, for the lack of a better term. How could a chicken be so typically male,

so anthropocentric? Were they all alike, even across the species? Niniane felt suddenly weary with a bone deep despair. She uncrossed her legs and lay back flat on the bed and covered her eyes with her forearm. For a while her thoughts were darkened with a familiar, bitter emotion she could not name.

When the name emerged she pushed it down, but it surfaced again like an empty life preserver from a shipwreck. Excluded. It made her feel excluded when both Charlie and Dillis would not agree with her. And after she had been the one to show Charlie how to read!

And yet, she knew that she really had done no such thing. She had read aloud to amuse herself and to keep herself company. It really had nothing to do with Charlie. And Charlie's ability had very little to do with her. What he had learned, he had learned on his own, through her, but by some mysterious agency completely beyond Niniane's understanding.

Niniane at that point decided that if she stayed in her room by herself one minute longer, she would go crazy. She didn't want to go downstairs where she might have to run into Dillis or Charlie, so she grabbed her secret stash of magazines from under the bed and dashed down the hallway to the bathroom, where she immersed herself in the tub until she heard Irene's truck crunch into the driveway. While in the tub she allowed herself to cry a bit, and with the tears came the reassurance (she knew not from where) that a prophet is often despised in her own country. That evening she joined the others at supper with her sense of purpose, as well as her nerves, rejuvenated; and, what's more, her skin and hair were clean and fragrant.

#

That evening, while the four humans played rummy, Dillis, who was losing, informed them that, in the course of the afternoon, he and Charlie had gone through all of the worthwhile articles in the 'J-K' volume of the World Book.

"At this rate," he said, watching as Irene masterfully shuffled the cards for the next hand, 'He'll be through the whole set in two weeks. Then what's he gonna read?"

Everybody looked over at Niniane. So, she decided to deny them the satisfaction of disputing with her by not saying anything. In fact, she was hoping to get Charlie interested in her well marked, paperback copy of Peter Singer's Animal Liberation, which had been a gift from Mercedes Hernandez. But that was between herself and Charlie, and could wait until Dillis went back home. She shrugged and gathered the cards that had been laid before her and appeared to study them as if her life depended on the hand she was about to play.

Dillis held his hand out to Charlie, who was perched near the edge of the table between himself and Niniane. "Charlie, what are you going to read after you finish the encyclopedias?"

*I don't know.* Scratched Charlie. Dillis repeated this for the group.

"We haven't thought that far ahead." said May. "We're just taking things one day at a time."

"What do you suggest, Romeo?" Irene said to Dillis.

"I don't know." Dillis eyed Irene. He couldn't tell, by the bantering way she always addressed him, if Irene liked him or not. "I don't read much these days. What do you want to read, Charlie?"

Charlie turned his gaze to Niniane, who was rearranging the cards in her hand. "Don't look at me, Charlie," she said. "Far be it from me to tell anybody what they should read."

Charlie gazed warily at his beloved. It was not like her to not have an answer. . He opened and shut his beak, and she stretched out her hand to him desultorily.

*But I can't decide all by myself!* He scratched. *I don't know what's good for me.*

Niniane did not repeat this, but turned her attention back to her cards. "What makes you think I do?" she murmured, flicking a glance over her cards at the other human beings. "Read whatever you want to, Charlie."

*Are you still going to read with me?*

Niniane felt, for a moment, a bit of heat in her cheeks. She was letting everyone's attitude make her cynical when it was natural that they didn't understand her unique mentoring relationship with Charlie, and natural that they should be concerned that she

was too much of an influence. But she knew, and obviously Charlie knew that she knew, what was best for Charlie.

“Of course I am, Charlie!” she stroked his neck.

*What if you don't like it?*

“I don't exactly love a whole lot of the encyclopedia, but I still read it, don't I? It's all a part of the important task of educating you, Charlie, and I love being a part of that. So, read what you want us to read, as long as it's something that will help you to understand the world better.” she said this last with emphasis.

*I want to read the Bible, then.*

Niniane threw her cards down on the table and covered her face with her hands.

“What did he say?” the others shouted.

Niniane just groaned into her hands.

Dillis held out his palm and Charlie repeated his request.

“He wants to read the Bible!” Dillis said wonderingly. “What for, Charlie?”

*I want to know more about Jesus.* Charlie scratched.

Dillis repeated this, wide-eyed, and Charlie sidled up close to him and closed his eyes as the three women groaned.

“No more TV for him!” said May, pointing her finger at Charlie. “Jesus, Ninny, what in Christa's name have you two been *watching?*”

#

"Y'know, Charlie." Dillis said that night, as the two of them lay, each on their respective pallets, in the dim living room, waiting for sleep, "I think it's interesting that you believe in God. I really do. Now, I'm not sure I *agree* with you, but, I have to admit, it's interesting." He paused, scratching his stomach thoughtfully. "But Niniane thinks you're crazy. And I bet those two ballbreaker aunts do too."

Charlie strode over to the head of the couch, and Dillis held down his palm so that they could communicate. *I know.* Scratched Charlie. *Sometimes I think they're right.*

"Really?" said Dillis. He sat up, put his glasses on, picked Charlie up and set him on his lap. "How come?"

*I don't know.* Scratched Charlie. *I don't want them to be upset with me.*

“Well, you have to admit, it’s odd.” Dillis shrugged. “But then again, you’re odd, Charlie. If you can read and write, why shouldn’t you believe in God?”

Charlie began to wonder what was so extraordinary about believing in God. The World Book had seemed to take for granted the existence of such a being. God had been mentioned in many articles throughout, and not only the ones related to Christianity. There had been, he remembered, a small article he and Niniane had read together at the very beginning of his education entitled ‘Atheism;’ this, in fact, had been his introduction to the very concept of ‘God’, upon reading it he had asked himself immediately if he disbelieved in a being conceived as the perfect, omniscient, omnipotent originator and ruler of the universe, the object of faith and worship. Niniane had explained to him that those words meant, essentially that Atheists did not believe that there was a Person who made things the way they are and who is responsible for the existence of everything. Charlie remembered feeling very shocked, almost personally offended that there were people who would argue that there was not a maker responsible for what has been made. His impression was that those ‘Atheists’ who were his first encounter with the articulation of ‘God’ were a peculiar minority, aberrations among humans just as he was an aberration among his own species. He could not imagine, at that early point in his life, the levels of distraction and dismay that might lead to such a commonplace repudiation of the obvious. As he had gone further in the encyclopedia, it became clear that even those who did recognize a creator disagreed as to the nature of this rather capricious Being. The very humans he had come to live among did not like the idea, at least, of Christianity. He had heard May and Irene mention a ‘Goddess’ here and again, and it made sense to him that Niniane, who had such a horror of bloodshed, would be constitutionally opposed to the idea of a young man nailed to a cross as an object of worship. But Charlie never dreamed that she simply dismissed the idea that there was anybody in charge. He thought perhaps she believed in a Goddess, like her aunts, a deity with whom she could identify as a capable, dynamic female. She could only pity an unreliable weakling like Jesus.

*Are you an atheist?* Charlie asked Dillis.

Dillis had always assumed that he was. As he had always assumed that poultry could not read. He considered his answer, hoping to not offend or upset Charlie. Finally he blurted out, "I just don't know, Charlie. I guess I don't see how anyone can know for sure. But I don't think anybody should have to believe in God if they don't want to."

Charlie took this in. Under what circumstances would one 'have' to believe, in anything? It seemed to him that things did not require belief. Things existed independent of belief. When he was in the shell, he believed in nothing beyond the shell, not even his mother, who had made the shell, but his mother, and everything in the world had been in existence regardless of his lack of belief. He had not believed in Niniane before she presented herself to him, yet, she had existed, otherwise none of this would be happening. He had not believed, in fact he had denied to himself, that he and Dillis would be anything other than enemies, yet, here they were, Charlie perched in Dillis' very bony lap, discussing, amicably, the most profound of topics. Charlie had no experience of God, but he had experienced enough in his singular journey to realize that experiences were, if not deceiving, maddeningly incomplete.

*Why would anyone have to believe in God?*

Dillis sighed. "People are funny, Charlie. They want everyone to believe exactly what they believe, do exactly like they do. People don't like to deal with anyone that's different."

Neither do chickens, Charlie thought wryly.

*So I shouldn't read the bible if Niniane doesn't like it?*

Dillis rolled his eyes. "Charlie," he whispered, "she's just upset because she wants you to spend all your time looking at pictures of slaughterhouses. Don't pay any attention to her. Read what you want to read. It's *your* education, after all. It won't hurt Niniane to read the bible. It's not like you're telling her she has to believe it? Are you?"

*No.* said Charlie. *But I don't want her to hate reading with me.*

At this Dillis found himself close to tears. He'd snuck off to smoke a bowl right after the card game, and where a few minutes before this nocturnal conversation he'd been feeling relaxed and serene, now he was feeling hopelessly sentimental.

"She'll never hate reading with you Charlie," he said, bending at the waist and awkwardly embracing the chicken in his lap. "Believe me. She loves you like you were

her baby. She'd do anything for you. She just gets all tight in the ass sometimes. It's how she is. She'll get over all this... this... messiah complex she has when it comes to you. She just doesn't want you to get into something she thinks is... oppressive, I guess. Just give her time."

Charlie lay his head gratefully against Dillis' ribs, then he craned his neck around to tap the boy's hand. Dillis opened his palm.

*Will you read the Bible with me?*

Dillis' eyes widened behind his glasses. "Sure," he said, "At least until Sunday. You know I'm going back to the city on Sunday."

Charlie had forgotten that. He didn't know what to say. *Why?* was what he finally scratched into the palm of his friend's hand.

"I have to." Dillis said, but as he said it he knew he could not leave the farm, not now. He would figure out some way to stay, if for no other reason than to read the bible with Charlie.

#

Dillis went swimming the following afternoon with Niniane. This did not bother Charlie as much as he would have thought it would. Dillis, after splashing around awhile, got winded and leaned against the side of the pool next to where Charlie perched, and they both watched Niniane as she doggedly swam her even, swift laps past them.

"I guess..." said Dillis as he was doused his generally smudgy glasses into the chlorinated water, "you want to be baptized."

*Baptized?* Charlie recalled the word from his reading of the encyclopedia, but for the moment, absorbed by his view of Niniane's graceful, hypnotic swimming, he could not connect it with its meaning.

"You know." said Dillis. "Dunked under water. That thing that Christians do."

*Christians have to be dunked under water?*

"Well, yeah, I think so. They make a big deal about it, don't they? I thought you knew."

*No.* Scratched Charlie. He tilted his head and looked down at his reflection in the chlorinated water. There was so much, so much that was important that he did not know. Something told him that there were things he needed to know that no one on the farm knew. Niniane did not like Christianity, and May, speaking for herself and Irene had told him that they, being witches, did not so much dislike the Christian religion as they felt it was awfully limiting.

*Will you baptize me?*

Dillis laughed. "I can't do that Charlie! You can't just let anybody baptize you. It has to be done by a priest, I think. Besides, I'm a Jew."

Charlie remembered reading in the 'J' volume of the World Book about that form of religion called Judaism with Dillis, but Dillis had not mentioned then that he was a Jew.

*You are?*

"Sure I am. Don't I look like a Jew?" said Dillis.

Charlie hesitated. He didn't have any idea what a Jew looked like, but he remembered a photograph from the World Book article on Judaism. It didn't look much like Dillis, though. It was a tiny picture of a gaunt, white bearded man with a small black cap pressed down over his long white hair who stood bent low over a table that sported candles at all four corners. The man was peering and pointing with a stick at what the caption called a 'torah scroll.' The image had impressed Charlie deeply. The bearded old man had seemed inseparable from what he was reading. Charlie recalled thinking when he saw that picture that this old man was someone who would understand why he wanted to learn more about this Jesus and God business.

Niniane passed behind Dillis on what must have been her fiftieth crossing. Charlie noticed that her skin was becoming nearly as brown as Irene's. With her small blue eyes and long, sun bleached brown hair, the effect was breathtaking. Suddenly, she submerged, and Charlie brought his attention back to his conversation with Dillis.

*Maybe I should be a Jew!*

Dillis smiled at Charlie. "Well, you've sure got the beak for it." He threw his head back and stood in the water for a full half minute, his skinny shoulders shaking with

mirth while Charlie looked on, totally perplexed. Finally Dillis composed himself. "Seriously, though. I don't think so, Charlie. You pretty much have to be born a Jew."

*You do?*

Dillis considered this. He remembered being told once that his grandmother, upon her marriage had had to become a Jew, converting, at least officially, from the Catholicism in which she'd been raised. "I went to some classes, took a bath," She'd said, chuckling, the tips of her gnarled, arthritic fingers brushing invisible lint from the bosom of her blouse, "and shazam! Now I'm a Jew! My father didn't speak to me for years..."

"Well, you can convert." said Dillis. "If that's what you want to do. But I think then you still have to be dunked under water. Or..." here Dillis blushed and grinned. "Since you're a boy, they'll probably circumcise you." He gave Charlie's underside a quick glance. "If they can find it..." Dillis grinned.

*Find what?*

"Never mind..." said Dillis, still grinning "I'm sorry Charlie. Do you really want to be a Jew?"

Charlie remembered the picture of the man with the scroll. That image had affected him, but in an entirely different way than the article about Christianity, which had, rather like Niniane, at once uplifted and deeply troubled him. Yes, he wanted to be as absorbed as that old man, he wanted to be as easygoing and affable as Dillis; it would be nice to be a Jew like them, just as it would be nice to be a human instead of being a freak of a chicken. But, he perceived, as he watched Niniane kick off against the edge of the pool for another lap, these things called religions seem to choose you, rather than the other way around. As do these things called women.

*I guess not.* He scratched into Dillis' palm.

Dillis nodded. His parents being hippies, he had never practiced Judaism to any significant degree himself, and could not imagine why anyone would want to go to such trouble.

"What do you want to be, then?" He inquired of Charlie. "There are all kinds of Christians. Hundreds of different kinds, I think."

Charlie had gathered that from the encyclopedia article. *What's the best kind?* He inquired.

“Don’t ask me!” Said Dillis. “I wouldn’t know. I think deep down they’re all the same, anyway.”

*Then why are there so many different kinds?*

“That’s a good question,” said Dillis. “What did the World Book say about that?”

Charlie cast his mind back to the World Book article on Christianity. There had been a mention of something called the ‘filioque’ over which there had been some early disagreement, then the selling of some things called ‘indulgences’ which had led to a major upheaval called the Protestant Reformation. After that point it seemed to Charlie that the once all-encompassing body called the Christian church had broken like a shell into a thousand jagged pieces. He couldn’t even remember all the different denominations that had been cross referenced at the end of the article on Christianity, but a few that stuck in his mind on account of the sheer poetry or strangeness of their names were the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Christadelphians, the Swedenborgians, and the Church of the Nazarene. *They don’t like each other, was his reply to Dillis. So they can’t be all the same.*

“I don’t know about that,” said Dillis. “They all seem the same to me. They just argue about details. Stuff that isn’t important. Don’t worry about it too much, Charlie.”

Dillis slipped off the edge of the pool into the water, leaving Charlie to think. It was easy enough for Dillis to tell him not to worry too much, about what kind of Christian to be, since he didn’t have to worry about what *he* was. He was a Jew, and what’s more, a human being. His identity would never be at issue the way that Charlie’s was, constantly. Dillis’ place in the world was all taken care of so that he could go on to think about other things. But Charlie, having stumbled into the morass of Christian identity, felt himself burdened with the responsibility to discern an absolute certainty amongst a welter of contradictions. The figure of Jesus, himself a welter of contradictions, was compelling, and for some reason Charlie felt an ineffable sense of intimacy with him. But what did it mean? Why did he feel this burgeoning urge to know more, do more, be more when that mysterious intimacy could be so gratifying?

A thought came to Charlie as if from some silent, empty, waiting place within, and yet beyond himself. It’s because, the thought told him, there’s no one to share it with.

Oh, thought Charlie. He felt a familiar constriction in his little heart, a keen, painful consciousness of his singularity. I can write to them forever, but none of them, no matter how much I love them and they love me, will understand what I mean, or what I need. I guess if I get baptized, like Dillis says, that'll help. I'll be a Christian, then, and the other Christians will know what I mean.

But the question remained as to what sort of Christian was the right kind to be. Obviously no one on the farm was going to be any help to him on that front. With a start, Charlie realized that he was going to be the one, in the end, to initiate his journey out of the only sanctuary he'd ever known.

#

When they finished swimming, Niniane and Dillis and Charlie went inside, and while Niniane was upstairs changing her clothes before supper, Charlie got Dillis' attention and asked him if he would sneak him out to where there were some Christians.

Dillis turned pale and withdrew his hand from under Charlie's beak. "I can't do that, Charlie!" he half whispered, half squeaked, "Niniane would fry us both! And listen, Charlie, you've got to be careful... I was being nice before, but you've gotta understand... Christians... well... at least in these parts... a lot of them are crazy. I mean really whacko. They hate everybody. And a chicken that reads and writes... I don't know, Charlie. Even if you do like Jesus... they still might think you're the Devil or something."

The Devil was another figure from the World Book that intrigued Charlie, and he thought he wouldn't mind learning more about him from these crazy Christians who had a knowledge of him, but he could see that Dillis was too agitated to be persuaded. He reached for the boy's hand. *But don't I need to be baptized by a Priest?* He scratched.

"Not right this minute," said Dillis. "What's the rush, Charlie?"

*I don't know.* Charlie scratched miserably.

Dillis patted the chicken's head awkwardly. He was sitting cross legged on the floor in front of the sliding glass door with Charlie perched on his thigh. "Is it really that important to you, Charlie?"

Charlie could detect a note of sadness in his friend's voice. It was a moment before he scratched his reply.

*Yes.*

Dillis sighed. He felt the way he imagined a mother bird must feel pushing a fledgling out of the nest for the very first time. I'll never have kids, he told himself.

"All right, Charlie. Whatever you need to do, I'll help you. But not right away. Don't you want to know more about these people before you... expose yourself?"

*Yes... but how?*

Dillis hugged Charlie, relieved that he could buy some time, not only for Charlie's evangelical ardor to cool, but to remain on the farm indefinitely. He would make the case that night for a program of religious education for Charlie, supervised by none other than himself.

#

The following afternoon, Dillis drove into town. After some effort he was able to locate a branch of the county Public Library. Hailing as he did from Boston, he was shocked by the meager selection of books on religion and philosophy available in that inadequate and under funded small town branch, but at least that made the process of selection easier. Using May's library card, he checked out the entire collection of books within the 100-299 Dewey classification system. He returned to the farm with about thirty books of varying length.

#

And so, for the next couple of weeks, except during meals, Charlie did little else but read, forgoing the card games and even those pleasant afternoons spent poolside watching Niniane swim. In addition to getting the books for him, Dillis had devised a method by which Charlie could, once a book was opened up for him, read on his own by having the top edge of the book secured underneath one of the heavy cushions from the living room sofa. With some effort, Charlie could turn the pages with his beak, and very

soon he found that reading on his own went much faster than reading while his friends turned the pages for him and voiced their own perceptions. Also, the reading was so specialized, and he was so invested in the subject matter, that Charlie managed to make his way through a good number of these difficult books in a short amount of time.

At first his reading made him feel even more confused. Dillis had presented him with the books in no particular order, and so, working from thinnest to lengthiest, Charlie began with a slim paperback with a portrait profile of a glaring, mustachioed human male on the cover. This book was called The Anti-Christ by Freidrich Nietzsche. That afternoon Niniane, upon peering down over Charlie at what he was reading, shrieked and said, “Charlie! What are you reading that for! That’s not even Christian! It’s worse. Nietzsche was a total fascist!”

Charlie did not know, at that point, what a fascist was, but clearly it was bad. Just from the sound of the word, at least the way Niniane said it, Charlie assumed it had something to do with eating meat. In a way he was relieved. Although he felt the prose of the Anti-Christ was uncommonly lovely, particularly in those passages such as the one entitled ‘*The Psychology of the Redeemer*,’ the tone seemed altogether too seductive and ironic. It was a book to enjoy, but not to take all that seriously. He found himself wondering if there were people who took what the book was saying absolutely seriously, and decided there could not be. Such people would no doubt behave in ways so thoroughly bestial that they would lose all sense of what it is to be a human, or even a sentient being.

From there Charlie went on to skim through a half dozen or so how to books on astrology. The prose style of these, compared to the World Book and The Anti-Christ, was jolly and refreshing, but he didn’t understand very much of what they were saying. At one point he asked Niniane what his sun sign was, and after some thought she told him that, having hatched on the 21<sup>st</sup> day of June, he was on the cusp of Gemini and Cancer. He then asked her what her sign was.

“Aires. Why?”

*I’m reading about astrology.*

Niniane had kissed him on the top of his head and said, “I’m glad you’re being open-minded, Charlie. But take it all with a grain of salt, okay?”

Charlie wasn't sure what she meant by that, but when he looked up his signs and her sign in the glossy purple and gold paperback entitled Linda Payne's Love Signs and found that he and Niniane, being water and fire, were rarely compatible, he lost interest. From astrology he went onto a colorful paperback with large type, titled, rather alarmingly, Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul which, not surprisingly, he found at intervals nourishing and nauseating. None of these books, however, were bringing him any closer to a sense of where, within the labyrinth of Christendom, he might find his place. Towards the end of the week, he began to lose patience, and he regarded the stack of unread books beside the sliding glass door hopelessly. This is no good, he told himself. What I'm looking for isn't in a book. It was precisely at that point that his glance hit upon the title on top of the stack that was to set in motion a chain of events that would lead him to where he would never have dreamed of going. It was a rather small book, bound in lavender buckram, with the simple, succinct, and very promising title On Certainty.

#

In the trials to come, Charlie was to discover that, no matter how unhinged he might become, he could restore himself to a degree of assurance regarding his own mission by recalling the words of item #239 in Ludwig Wittgenstein's posthumously published collection of aphorisms regarding the nature of truth statements entitled On Certainty. Just when he had given up hope of finding, at least within a book, some signal to guide his way, he encountered, in Item 239, a confirmation of that conviction that was deepest in him but which he had not before had the words to say. "Catholics believe..." Item 239 said, in part, "...that in certain circumstances a wafer completely changes its nature and at the same time all evidence proves the contrary."

At the time of this encounter, Charlie was alone in the house. May had gone with Irene into town for some reason, and Niniane and Dillis were swimming. No one heard his indomitable cock-crow, or saw the burgeoning, blood red comb on the crown of his head stiffen. He'd been flipping through the pages of the book, which was printed on the left in German and on the right in English, without much attention, when the phrase

“Catholics believe” caught his eye and compelled him to discover what, in fact, or at least in the view of this Wittgenstein character, Catholics believe. At first, in finding no word about God, or about Jesus, or even the woman Mary, about whom, Charlie already had gathered, Catholics believed more than any other religion, he was disappointed. What was this about a wafer? Charlie raised his head to look through the sliding glass door when the implications of what Catholics believed about a wafer hit him with the force of a golden feather. “Catholics believe... that a wafer completely changes its nature... when all evidence proves the contrary.”

Through the sliding glass door the summer sun, invisible to Charlie at its zenith, bathed the world in transforming light. He could hear the muffled but not so distant sounds of Niniane and Dillis in the swimming pool, splashing and shouting. Charlie crowed again, aware that no one would hear him, but it seemed to him to be important to add his voice to their hilarity. I’m not alone! He crowed. Catholics believe what *I* believe! They believe in the unbelievable! They’ll believe I belong no matter what I look like!

Thus Charlie made up his mind to be baptized into the Roman Catholic Faith.

#

Dillis was the first one to know. Charlie told him that night after the card game, after the women had gone upstairs to bed.

“Catholic!” Exclaimed Dillis. “Wow. That’s pretty intense. How come, Charlie?”

Charlie hesitated before answering. How could he put it so that his friend would understand? Should he scratch out the passage from Wittgenstein? Was it even necessary to explain? In the hours that had passed since his epiphany, Charlie’s mind had been pregnant with an otherworldly calm. He hadn’t said much to anybody about anything, so wonderfully at peace did he feel with himself and his decision to dedicate himself to something that he could be sure would accept him. He’d spent the afternoon reading as much as he could find among his collection of library books about the Roman Catholic Church, and while some of what he found out was disturbing, such as the fact

that that church would only admit male human beings to their mysterious priesthood, for the most part what he read only served to confirm him in his new allegiance. One book in particular had charmed him, and he read it voraciously, in one uninterrupted two hour sitting. It was titled Letters to a Niece, and its author was one Baron Freidrich Von Hugel, whose photograph was printed on the frontispiece. The Baron, whose long white hair and beard and pained expression made him look, Charlie thought, like an anxious Santa Claus, was not a Catholic priest, but simply a well to do old man who spent his time advising many people, among them one of his nieces called Gwendolyn, as to how they might best understand the ways of God to humanity. The artless rhetoric of these letters to a niece captivated Charlie. Each one began with “My Dearest, Lovable Sweet Little Gwen-Child,” or some other such saccharine phrase and then went on to elucidate, using an odd mélange of sophisticated theological terms and mundane imagery, the peculiar logic of Catholicism. One passage in particular had struck Charlie with a sense of a mind so very near his own, and he wished this Von Hugel was still alive for him to talk to. “You see, My Gwen...” the Baron wrote:

“...how vulgar, lumpy, material, appear great lumps of camphor in a drawer: and how ethereal seems the camphor smell all about in the drawer. How delicious, too, is the sense of bounding health, as one races along some down on a balmy spring morning; and how utterly vulgar, rather improper indeed, is the solid breakfast, are the processes of digestion that went before! Yet the camphor lumps, and the porridge, and its digestion, they had their share, had they not? in the ethereal camphor scent, in the bounding along upon that sunlit down? And a person who would both enjoy camphor scent and disdain camphor lumps; a person who would revel in that liberal open air and condemn porridge and digestion: such a person would be ungrateful, would she not?—would have an unreal, a superfine refinement? The institutional, the Church is, in religion, especially in Christianity, the camphor lump, the porridge, etc.; and the “detached” believers would have no camphor scent, no open air, bounding liberty, had there not been, from ancient times, those concrete, “heavy,” “clumsy,” “oppressive” things—lumps, porridge, Church.”

Surely, felt Charlie, his friend would see the wisdom in that. But when Charlie considered asking Dillis to take up that book of letters to a niece and read that passage for himself, it made him feel funny. It made him feel... well... *pushy*, as if he were trying to convince Dillis of something. When there was no need, really, to convince Dillis of

anything, because Dillis was not standing in the way of anything, in fact, quite the contrary. And, if he's not against me, Charlie thought reasonably, he's with me.

"Charlie?" said Dillis, while Charlie, who seemed frozen, beak lowered about a centimeter or so above the boy's palm was pondering these things. "You there, Charlie? Why the Catholic Church, I said?"

Charlie considered for another moment, then lowered his beak. *It's the biggest one*, he scratched.

"I guess they are." said Dillis. "But that doesn't mean they're the best. Although, they're not the worst, either. But I'll tell you one thing, Niniane's not going to like it. May and Irene won't either. They'll say its sexist, you mark my words."

Charlie hadn't thought of that. He lifted his head. The implications of his decision rose up in his mind like some beast of prey from the wild with infinite, staggering force. Niniane would indeed be unhappy, that was for sure. The aunts, while they probably wouldn't stand in his way, would likely be disappointed. Charlie knew enough to realize that the attitude of the Catholic Church to women was at best insulting and at worst dangerous. And yet, the words of Wittgenstein and Von Hugel had had an impact upon him that he could not deny. It was to the Roman Catholic Church that his encounter with them referred him, and it was to the Roman Catholic Church that his spirit inclined. I know it's not perfect, he said to himself, but neither am I. And neither, it occurred to him as an afterthought, is Niniane.

The sprouting comb on Charlie's head flushed with sorrow and shame. He turned away from Dillis' palm and hung his head for a moment. And, yet, with these feelings came an intimation of the transitory nature of all shame and sorrow that, once he admitted it, left him feeling strong and clean. *It's what I have to do*, he scratched in Dillis' palm, and he felt no need to explain any more, at least not that night.

## Chapter Nine/ Campaigning

His resolve notwithstanding, Charlie found that he didn't want to share his plans with Niniane and the aunts right away. He mentioned this to Dillis the next morning, and Dillis readily agreed to keep mum. In the meantime, they campaigned separately with the women to allow Dillis to stay at the farm for as long as possible.

Niniane wasn't hard to convince. "You'll lose your job." She said to Dillis when he approached her with a request for her to speak to her aunts about letting him stay and help to educate Charlie.

"I know." Dillis said. "I don't care. This... this is more important."

They were walking along the tree line that bordered the east pasture, where the cows grazed, and Niniane leaned against Dillis suggestively. She knew he would come around to seeing things her way.

The aunts, the three young ones felt, would need more convincing. After breakfast one morning, the chicken appealed to May's low key yet steadfast irritation with Niniane's vegan stance. *I'm going to miss Dillis*, he scratched into May's palm as he sat perched on the counter next to the sink while she washed the breakfast dishes. *I wish he didn't have to leave.*

"That's nice." said May with a sidelong look at Charlie. "I wasn't sure at first that you guys would get along. But I guess you did."

Charlie's comb burned and tingled, and he ducked his head. On top of everything else that these human females could do, could they read minds as well? He had practically forgotten, himself, how jealous he had been of Dillis before the boy had even arrived. Why couldn't they forget, too?

He waited until May finished scrubbing bacon grease from the bottom of a cast iron pan and signaled for her palm. *I guess now that he's going home, Niniane will be the one to pick out books and stuff for me. You and Irene are always so busy.*

May turned and regarded the chicken. "I guess that's true, Charlie. How do you feel about that?"

Okay, said Charlie. *The stuff she likes me to read is pretty interesting. Even if it is scary.*

May's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, scary!"

Charlie's wings ruffled for a moment. It was his version of what the humans called a shrug. *You know, he scratched, kind of scary...the things they do to animals... in other places. She showed me this magazine article about a meat packing plant in some place called Toledo, and it had all these chickens without their feathers hanging by their feet from this pole...*

Charlie broke off here to rest his beak for a minute—he wasn't used to writing at such length, and it was hard on the neck, as well. The picture he was describing was something that Niniane had actually shown him one day before Dillis' arrival, and it *had* been awfully disturbing. To see even a dated black and white image of such a number of his kind, lifeless, stripped of their feathers, waiting passively to be processed into chunks of meat for anonymous humans to eat... it had stuck in his mind like a reproach for several days. Even now, recalling the grim, blank expressions of the men in the picture as they stood, white capped, over a conveyer belt loaded with yet more limp, naked dead chickens, Charlie wanted to shake the image out of his head. He would rather not ever think about such things, but sometimes it was necessary, and mentioning it to May was having the desired effect. Her free hand was on her hip now, and her mouth was set in a thin line before she spoke.

"That girl doesn't know when to quit!" she said. "Of all the twisted ideas! To show you something like that! I swear to Goddess, sometimes I think she needs a good old fashioned tanning. No wonder you're going Christian on us!"

Charlie wasn't sure what May meant by that, so he let it pass. *Dillis doesn't like it when we read stuff like that, either. He says it's propa... propa...* Charlie raised his head and waited.

"Propaganda," finished May. "He's right about that. That's one sharp young man, in his own way. He's not as dim as he looks. Did he really say that?"

Charlie nodded.

"In front of Niniane?"

Charlie nodded again.

May smiled. "Well I'll be. Good for him." She laughed. "Wait'll I tell Irene."

Charlie would have smiled, too, if he was able. He waited while May chuckled and shook her head, then reached for her palm. *I wish he didn't have to go.*

May stopped laughing and bent close to Charlie and winked. "Maybe he doesn't have to... at least not right away. I'll have a little chat with him this afternoon. He's a good kid. And the more the merrier, right?"

Charlie nodded.

#

And so the summer days passed. Dillis eased effortlessly into the routine. When Charlie finished the entire World Book, Dillis mentioned that they might as well start on the bible.

They had just come to the end of the W-X-Y-Z volume of the World Book. Dillis closed it with a bang.

"Well, I hope you guys enjoy your bible study," said Niniane.

Dillis looked at her wide-eyed. "You said you'd read it with Charlie!" he said.

Niniane rolled her eyes at him over Charlie's head. "If you want to read the bible, Dillis, you're welcome to. I don't feel like it. Charlie can believe whatever he wants to believe, but I don't have to pretend I like it, do I?"

"Who asked you to like anything?" said Dillis with some heat. "Why do you have to be so defensive? What's your problem?"

Niniane stood and her hands gripped her waist like she was holding herself down to their level with some effort. "Dillis, has it ever occurred to you that this might be difficult for me? Charlie may have strong feelings, but so do I. My grandfather was a religious nut, and when I was little we had to go with him to church—to a Southern Baptist Church, Dillis-- every weekend every summer! I've had enough Jesus to last ten lifetimes."

"Aww, shit, Niniane, you told me your grandfather could barely talk!"

"That doesn't matter, Dillis! In case you forgot, we live in a patriarchal society that privileges the Christian religion. You of all people ought to think twice about that! We have to stand up for our rights!"

Charlie ducked his head.

Dillis was silent for a moment, and when he spoke it was in a voice lower and steadier than any Charlie or even Niniane had ever heard him use before. "Niniane, give me a break. This is a chicken we're talking about. We could take him right now, wring his neck and eat him for dinner if we wanted to and he couldn't do a thing to stop us, and you're talking about your rights."

There was a long silence. Charlie felt dazed. He had never before heard the brutal truth about his unique situation put so plainly forth. His continued existence, in a sense, depended wholly on their disposition toward him. If he had not tried to talk to Niniane, he realized, it was conceivable that he would not be alive today. And if he should upset her—or any of the others-- make them angry, if they withdrew from him their presence, their protection, what then? On who could he really depend to see things his way? -They're really no different from chickens- he thought. -And neither am I, no matter who I talk to, if they don't like what I have to say-

It was Niniane who broke the silence. "That's not fair, Dillis. I would never do anything to hurt Charlie. Never."

Charlie wanted to tell her he knew that, but her hands were still gripping her waist.

After a moment, Charlie reached for Dillis' hand.

Niniane couldn't help herself. She waited a minute, and then when Dillis didn't say anything back, but nodded to Charlie, she glared at him. "Care to let me in on your conversation, or am I dismissed?"

Dillis looked at her calmly. "He just asked me if I've read the bible."

Niniane cut her eyes away, then after a minute faced him again. "And you nodded? Dillis, when did you ever read the Bible?"

"In Hebrew school. A long time ago."

"Oh that." She said. "But you couldn't have read the whole thing."

"No one reads the whole thing," said Dillis. "Except maybe rabbis and priests."

Charlie wrote again into Dillis' hand. Niniane touched him lightly on the head. "Charlie," she said. "I'm sorry. You know how I am. I'm just being a bitch. You can talk to me." She opened her palm.

*Well, I have two questions now.*

"What are they?"

*Well, I was wondering if you know any priests.*

Niniane groaned. "Of course I don't. Why?"

"He wants to be baptized." said Dillis.

"*What?!*"

"He's serious Niniane."

Niniane groaned. "Of course I don't know any priests, Charlie. And I don't know how to find one, either."

"I keep seeing a big church with a statue of Mary in the yard not too far down the highway." said Dillis.

Niniane bit her lip. "Dillis, we can't take Charlie to a Catholic *church!* They'd think we were crazy! And as soon as they figured out that Charlie really does communicate... oh, I don't even want to think about what they'd do. They'd say he was possessed or something."

"Niniane, not the Catholics... they don't do that anymore... this isn't the middle ages..."

"That doesn't matter, Dillis! People aren't ready!"

Dillis stood up. "Well, what were you planning on doing, Niniane? Keeping him in the farmhouse forever? He's got to get out sometime. He needs to be involved in something."

Niniane crossed her arms over her chest and scowled. If she had known, in the beginning, that Dillis would ever speak to her this way, she never would have invited him to the farm. He was clearly too sentimental, too eager to cater to Charlie's naïve whims. "Dillis, you know we can't take him to see some priest. You know that they won't understand."

"I don't know that, Niniane."

"Well, I do."

*“How!?”*

“Dillis, don’t shout at me. You know as well as I do that the Catholic Church is not animal-friendly.”

Dillis stood up and pointed a finger in Niniane’s face like an angry schoolteacher. “That’s what this is all about, then. You don’t trust anybody who isn’t vegan. Especially when it comes to Charlie. My God, you don’t even trust Charlie! Can’t you see his mind is on other things?”

Niniane gritted her teeth. “Can’t *you* see that if Charlie just goes out and does whatever he wants he’ll end up on a rotisserie! He’s only a month old, for God’s sake, Dillis! Maybe he’s a chicken genius because he can read and write, but he doesn’t know anything about the world!”

“No one is going to eat Charlie, Niniane. Especially not any Catholic priest.”

Charlie felt the top of his head grow warm at the thought of being eaten. Again he reflected that if Niniane were to eat him, he would not mind. To satisfy her in any way would be fulfilling. And yet, for all of that, despite her vociferous objections, he knew he must be baptized. Since it was clear that he could never really please her, it remained for him to fulfill his own destiny.

Niniane drew a deep breath. When she spoke, her voice was as soft and imploring as either of them had ever heard it. “But they might take him away.”

Dillis nodded and sat down. The two humans looked down at Charlie, still perched on the glider seat, taking in everything. Dillis spoke first.

“Yeah, they might do that. Charlie, maybe it’s too soon. If word gets out about you, someone might try to take you away.”

Charlie opened and closed his beak. Dillis held out his palm.

*Why would anyone try to take me away?*

“Because you’re one of a kind, Charlie. To the rest of the world, you’d be a curiosity. People would never leave you alone. They would keep trying to figure out how you could do the things you do. They might not care about you, Charlie, the way that we do.”

*Why wouldn’t they?*

A swift, sorrowful look passed between Dillis and Niniane before Dillis answered. “Niniane’s right about one thing, Charlie. People are usually pretty dangerous. They’re only out to please themselves. Even if they didn’t want to eat you, they would try to... what’s the word... *exploit* you one way or another. They’d probably try to figure out some way to make money off you, I bet.”

Charlie noted the re-occurrence of that word ‘exploited.’ He had not seen it in the World Book Encyclopedia, and he still did not know what it meant, since Niniane had run away screaming as soon as he’d asked her that question in the very beginning. He decided that now was not the time to ask again. Whatever it was, it couldn’t be as bad as the coop had been. He opened and closed his beak.

Dillis held out his palm.

*Are you sure you can’t baptize me?*

“I’m sure Charlie.”

*And Niniane can’t either, or May, or Irene.*

“I don’t think so.”

*Then I guess I need to talk to a Priest.*

When Dillis repeated this, Niniane began to cry. Sitting down on the glider beside the resolute chicken, sandwiching Charlie between herself and Dillis, she stroked the feathers on his back and tried to compose herself. “I’m sorry, Charlie. I know this is important to you. I just feel like... I guess I’m just afraid of what’s going to happen. One priest knows, then the whole church knows, the next think you know they’ll be calling the *papers*, then probably the government will want to run tests on you or something and... God, I don’t even want to think about it. If there was just some way we could keep it a *secret*...” she broke off and sighed, a long, shuddering, hopeless breath.

Dillis snapped his fingers. “Wait a minute!” He grinned. “We’ll take him into one of those... whadayacallem... confessionals! We’ll *confess* that we’ve got a miracle chicken! That way they can’t tell anybody!”

Niniane groaned. “Dillis, that won’t work. They don’t have those things anymore.”

“Yeah they do!”

“They don’t keep everything secret, though. That’s unethical. What if a murderer came in there, and...”

Dillis sat down on the glider and waved her words away. “It is secret, Niniane, I’m telling you. It’s perfect!”

“Dillis, what makes you think you know how the Catholic Church does things. You’re Jewish! I bet you’ve never even been inside a Catholic Church.”

“Niniane, I lived in Boston for ten years. All my friends went to Confession. I’m telling you, they can’t snitch, those priests.”

Charlie reached for Dillis’ palm. *Everything you say, they can’t tell anybody else?*

“That’s right.”

*You can tell them anything?*

“Yep. That’s what they’re there for.”

Charlie turned to Niniane and opened and shut his beak. She held out her soft, damp, fragrant palm.

*Don’t worry*, he scratched. It gave him such joy to reassure his beloved that it was all he could do to keep from crowing.

## Chapter Ten/ Disturbing the Priest

"Here." Said Dillis, pointing to the display on the computer screen . "Our Lady of Pity, Rt.32 six miles out of Bethel Township, Fr. Carl Frank, Parochial Vicar."

*What's a parochial vicar?*

"I have no idea."

Charlie couldn't stand the glare of the computer screen. Something about its aggressive flatness, it's buzzing quality hurt his eyes and made him feel nervous. He backed up to the edge of the desk, turned around, perched, and waited for Dillis to finish scrolling up and down the screen. Finally Dillis logged off, leaned back, and regarded Charlie.

"So. Whaddaya think? Wanna give them a call? Father Carl Frank. Sounds like an straightforward guy." Dillis held out his hand.

Charlie shook his head slowly back and forth. A bit of wattle was beginning to sprout under his beak, and he sometimes shook his head like this to relax himself, to feel the new and somehow comforting weight of his own development.

*I have to think.*

He thought a lot, lately, before doing anything. The conversation on the glider just a few days before had thrust upon him a very uncomfortable sense of his own mortality. He now recalled, with a chilling clarity, images from the encyclopedia that he'd dismissed before. One image in particular haunted him this morning, it was of a row of chicken carcasses, plucked and beheaded, one following the next like a gruesome shish kebab on a stainless steel pole that penetrated their body cavities from esophagus to anus. Reflecting upon that image, Charlie now shared, to some degree, Niniane's concern about strangers such as Catholic priests.

*We have to be very careful.*

The next morning Fr. Carl Frank arrived at his tiny office in the rectory of Our Lady of Pity and found a number of notes scrawled by his secretary, who had taken all calls while he had been on his Monday Sabbatical. He stared for a moment, uncomprehending at a curious one near the bottom of the pile. He had a terrific hangover.

"3:51 p.m. Monday. Please call 555-5362 ASAP. A theological question to be answered. Ask to speak to Ninny Ann or Phyllis. New Parishioners?"

#

The priest from Our Lady of Pity had called the morning before, and Niniane, who had answered the phone, made him hold until she found Dillis and Charlie, who were on the porch reading Genesis.

"You guys come inside," she said. She had not yet brushed her hair, and this, alongside the stricken expression on her face, gave her the air of a trapped animal.

"There's a priest on the phone, and I can't deal with it."

Dillis nudged Charlie, grinned, and gathered him up. "Here we go, Chuck!"

They followed Niniane inside, and Dillis took the receiver, still holding Charlie in the crook of his arm.

"Hello," he said. "This is Dillis."

Charlie strained to understand what the voice on the other end was saying, but all he could hear was garble.

"Well," began Dillis, in a voice unusually high and urgent. "I was wondering if you might have some time to talk this week. You see, I'm interested in joining the Catholic Church, and I understand the first thing you need to do is talk to a priest."

More garble.

"Oh, I'm not anything. I mean, my family's Jewish, but we don't believe...I mean..."

Silence. More garble.

"No sir, I haven't. I mean, Father. They wouldn't be interested. This is just..."

Dillis was interrupted in mid-sentence. Then- "I'm seventeen."

A lengthy garbling.

Dillis grimaced. Charlie pecked him, alarmed, but Dillis waved his hand and mouthed the words "It's okay."

"I wouldn't do anything against their wishes, Sir. They're really... open-minded."

A long silence. A garbled question.

"Oh I could come by anytime." Dillis said, winking at Charlie and Niniane. "I'm on vacation."

Some more garbling, then Dillis hung up the phone with many thanks. He set Charlie down on the counter and faced him. "Boy, was he a grouch! But we have an appointment, Charlie. Thursday afternoon at two thirty."

Charlie looked at Niniane, who bit her lip and ran upstairs.

"Oh, for the love of Pete." Dillis groaned. "Don't pay any attention to her, Charlie."

Charlie opened his beak. *I'm scared. I need something to eat.*

Dillis and Charlie sat at the kitchen table, and though they had recently had breakfast, they shared a piece of well-done, liberally buttered toast and ice tea. At one point Dillis turned to Charlie and said, with a conspiratorial wink, "I decided not to say anything right away about confession, because the first thing they ask you is when your last confession was, and since I've never confessed before, I don't think I can fake it. It's probably nothing like it is in the movies. But I promise it's confidential... that means secret. Anyway, I figured that it would be better to tell him I'm not catholic, but that I *want* to be, then tell him I have to confess, and *then* hit him with you. You have to be careful with these priests.

*Why?*

Dillis considered. "They're like shrinks. They've heard it all, and they can spot a phony."

*What's a shrink?*

Dillis thought a moment. "Well, it's almost exactly the same thing as a priest. A shrink listens to all your problems, but a priest listens to all your sins."

*Can a shrink baptize me?*

Dillis laughed. "No."

*It'll have to be a priest, then.*

#

Niniane woke herself up, whimpering. She'd felt thoroughly uneasy, in her body as well as in her mind, ever since the priest had introduced himself to her over the telephone. She took to her bed right after supper. She'd been disappointed by May and Irene's tepid reaction to the news that Dillis was planning to take Charlie into town to see, of all things, a catholic priest. She'd expected them, if only in the interest of their own privacy, to put up more resistance. But when Dillis told them, the aunts had simply glanced at one another and nodded as if they'd seen it coming. When Niniane interjected that she had tried to talk the two males out of this pointless and perilous rendezvous, everyone, even Charlie, ignored her. She left the table without another word, on the verge of some very embarrassing and otherwise unaccountable angry tears.

She'd fallen to sleep almost instantly. Her clothes, still damp from the heat of the day, were still on her, and the curtains were left drawn. She dreamed of many things, but the final dream woke her up with a retch that left her sitting upright in bed facing her own dim image in the mirror above her grandmother's antique vanity. Within that dream, she was in some garish, unfamiliar fast-food restaurant with Dillis, eating what she thought was a perfectly vegan soybean burger, but which was actually, she realized with a sickening jolt that woke her up, none other than Charlie. For a brief but interminable moment upon waking, she could not clear her mind of the final image from the dream, the image of the smooth, shiny, unmistakably familiar tip of Charlie's beak poking almost imperceptibly out of the ground up mealy mass which made up the patty she was lifting daintily to her open mouth.

After the immediate horror of the dream receded and her breathing became regular, she lay back down and gazed wide eyed at the ceiling. The room looked strange and dimly haunted with the curtains left open; there was a new moon out which lent the darkness inside and outside a luminous clarity. --It was just a bad dream-- she told herself.

She turned her head to see the bedside alarm clock. It was exactly five minutes past midnight. There was nothing for her to do but wait to fall back to sleep.

But that fall was a long time coming. The dream and its final image nagged at her like an alarm clock just out of reach; nagged at her to admit its existence and to respond to it, to allow it its meaning.

It's just a dream, she told herself, but telling herself this did not bring sleep or peace any nearer. She sat up again in bed and remembered something May had once told her about something Irene had told *her* about Irene's five-year stint in Women's Prison in West Virginia for aggravated assault upon a police officer. Irene had said that the hardest thing about leaving something behind was the prevalence of that something in your dreams. You never stop having prison dreams after you've been in prison, said Irene, because a part of you never leaves, no matter how hard you try. It's become a part of you, because you've been there.

-Will a part of me always eat meat?-- Wondered Niniane. -Does a part of me want to eat Charlie?

She stood up, unexpectedly. She walked across the room and leaned over the glass covered surface of the old vanity. She gazed at her own face in the mirror and sighed. Her tan face looked ghastly in the moonlight. A few strands of long brown hair stuck against her damp cheek. --I look and feel like shit-- She thought. Into the mirror she mouthed the words -It was just a dream.

But it was no good. The horror the dream evoked in her made the questions it raised impossible for her awakewnd mind to ignore. I'm asking too much of Charlie, she admitted to herself. He's never going to want to speak out against the meat industry. He may do it, but he won't want to do it. It won't mean anything to him, even if it means the world to me.

Niniane turned away from the mirror and lay back on her bed, her arms and legs spread against the rumpled sheets. -He wants to be like Dillis-- she thought. --He doesn't want to be like me anymore.

Niniane sighed. This was not exactly the truth, she knew, but it was close. For the first time she felt like she was beginning to understand Charlie; and that what she

understood was light years away from what she had always believed about him. She reiterated in her mind a phrase that summed it up for her. -He doesn't want to be like me--

--Why doesn't he?--

Because he is something completely different. He may be a chicken, I might have taught him how to read and write, but the way he thinks has nothing to do with me. It's just that I can't imagine not wanting to do something to stand up for yourself. He could be roasted, but he's more worried about his soul, whatever that is.

What good, Niniane thought, was your soul if they destroy your body? If all your body is good for is to sacrifice it, what's the point?

Lying in the dark, Niniane's hands moved up and down and across her own body. Her upper arms, her breasts, her stomach, her thighs, she reached for them all as if to reassure herself that she did indeed possess them. The thought of being without these things, a disembodied soul bereft of these familiar boundaries, made her shudder.

I don't understand that chicken, she thought, but I guess I'll have to trust him.

She pictured him in her mind, a fast growing, if slightly scrawny chicken who, like his comb and wattle, was just beginning to come into his own. She remembered the first words she had ever understood him to say to her those few short weeks ago that felt now like a lifetime.

*Will you go out with me?*

Niniane smiled in the darkness. He does love me, she thought. Even after all this. Dillis says that when I'm swimming, he can barely take his little eyes off me.

She turned over and drew her pillow to her chest. So I can't be that bad for him, she thought. Or he wouldn't love me.

Not long after this she drifted off to a sleep uncomplicated by further dreams.

#

The next morning, Niniane was up and showered and dressed even before May and Irene woke up. She went downstairs to see if Charlie was up.

He was, of course. Charlie was always up before sunrise, and as the days passed it took more and more effort to suppress the crow that filled his throat as the first pale fingers of sunlight crept underneath the curtains into the living room.

Niniane tiptoed over to his drawer by the sliding glass door and squatted. “Morning, Charlie.” she said, and held out her hand.

*Good morning.* He answered. *Why are you up so early?*

“Oh, I’ve been up for a while. It’s a big day,” she said. “Aren’t you excited?”

Charlie lifted his beak from her palm and looked at her. She had seemed so upset the evening before! She had left them after dinner, and without her the rest of the humans didn’t seem to have anything to say to one another. May and Irene had gone to bed far earlier than usual, and Dillis just watched the television. Sensing the real tension that everyone was feeling on his account, Charlie had been dreading the preliminaries of his excursion to see the priest, but now here was Niniane, up with the sun, asking him how he was feeling! He lowered his beak.

*Yes, he scratched. But I’m a little scared, too.*

“I don’t blame you,” she said. “You’ve never been away from home before. But everything’s going to be okay Charlie, don’t worry. We won’t let you out of our sight.”

Charlie’s beak opened. We? Niniane was coming along to see the priest? Charlie closed his beak and looked up at her.

“What is it, Charlie? Listen, don’t be scared. We’re not going to let anything bad happen.”

He shook his head. He hadn’t imagined that Niniane would want to go along. Of course, now that he thought about it, it made perfect sense that she would assume herself to be included. After all, she was his savior, at least in a literal sense, and her protective, if not to say controlling instincts would demand that she be with him every step of the way, even on a pilgrimage of which she disapproved. He turned away from her and trotted over to where the two curtains that covered the sliding glass door met.

“Do you want me to open up the drapes, Charlie?” said Niniane.

He nodded.

She opened the drapes, and as she did so Charlie thought fast. Now that he knew that Niniane wanted to go with him, it became clear to him that she must not. Her

presence, he realized, would dominate the encounter no matter how valiantly she strove not to interfere. Despite her unexpected calm this morning, Charlie knew how badly she needed to protect him from his destiny, and he knew that if she were along he would be unable to allow himself to speak (or scratch) freely. Implicit in his passion for her were his manifold inhibitions. Her protectiveness was all he had of her love, but there was no place for a protective Niniane in his quest for baptism. It was right that Dillis would be along, for Charlie's friendship with Dillis had no element of possession, and thus no excitement or anything else that might compromise a direct and unmediated apprehension of the will of God. But Niniane, even when she was being agreeable, was far too much of a consideration. She couldn't come along! But how could he tell her not to?

"Charlie?" she sat down beside him and held out her palm.

*You can't come along*, he scratched, before he knew what he was doing.

"What?" She cried, and snatched away her hand. "Charlie, what are you talking about? Of *course* I'm going. If you think I'm going to let you go all the way into the town to see some complete stranger of a Catholic Priest with only *Dillis* of all the meatheads in the world to keep an eye on you, you've got to be out of your mind..."

Her strange, guilty, unreal reasonableness was burned away like the morning fog. Charlie would have laughed if it were physiologically possible. He looked out the glass and waited for her rant to end and for her to remember that he needed her hand, close by and steady if they were to communicate.

Eventually she remembered. "Are you even listening to me?" she demanded, and held her palm down in front of him.

*Yes*, he scratched. *But please don't be mad. I just don't think you would be very comfortable.*

"I don't *care* about being comfortable," she said. "But somebody has to be along to make sure you don't do anything..." She sputtered, blushed, and was silent.

Charlie knew what she was going to say. Stupid. To her, this affair of the soul was nothing more than a fool's errand. Charlie was not offended. In the days to come he all too often found himself feeling the same way.

*I really wish you didn't want to come.*

“*Why*, Charlie? You can’t just strike out on your own. How are you going to know what to say to this priest? You have to be *careful*, Charlie.”

Careful was what he knew he must resist the temptation to be. He took what was, for a chicken, a deep breath. If he was going to be brave, he may as well start now.

*I have to do this my way*, he scratched gently into his beloved’s ever tense and impatient palm. She withdrew her hand and looked at it for a long time as if he had dipped his beak in ink. Once again she doubted the goodness of her own heart—a terrible feeling. She was as lost and frustrated as she had been the night before after waking up from that awful dream.

“How about if I stay in the car?” She said finally.

Charlie shook his head. Just her proximity, he knew, would be a mitigating factor. If she were there, even in the car, he would fall back on her. It was the law of nature, of their nature, at least.

*I want you to stay here and wait for me*, he scratched.

Niniane closed her eyes and a little peace returned. “All right.” She said. “Whatever you say, Charlie. It’s your day.”

#

The morning was taken up with the business of fine-tuning their plans. Dillis had driven into town the evening before to fill his tank with gas to make sure there was little chance that they would have to stop at any point along the way. In the end the trip, at least to and from the church, went smoothly.

For Charlie the ride was in many ways the highlight of the journey. It was suggested that Charlie should ride in the trunk, but this degree of security wasn’t really acceptable to anybody. In the end Niniane found a yellow milk crate that Dillis strapped into the passenger seat of the old Duster. From there he could see the sky through the passenger window. But as they began their journey, the young chicken was too overwhelmed, too entranced by the new experience of moving at such high speed to do much more than squawk.

Dillis couldn't help laughing. At times like these, unlike others, it was easy to see that Charlie was still a chicken, for all of his humanity.

Dillis held out his hand. "Are you scared, Charlie?"

Being spoken to brought Charlie back to his senses, somewhat. *No.* He scratched. *For a minute I thought I might pass out, though.*

"Oh!" said Dillis. "Why didn't you tell me?" He eased on the brake until the car was crawling. "Once we get closer to town, I'll have to pick up the speed again. If we go too slow, we might get stopped by a policeman, but if that happens just stay cool... I've got it all worked out, I'll just tell him you're sick and that I have to get you to the vet. I still don't want to get pulled over, though. You think you'll be okay?"

*Yes.* said Charlie. He looked out the window of the passenger seat at the trees they were passing on the country highway. A moment ago it had all been just a greenish-brown blur, but having slowed down, Dillis had restored the scenery to a recognizable reality for Charlie. He wished he could see what Dillis called the street.

He turned his head to observe Dillis in the act of driving. It was soon clear that Dillis was obliged to keep his eyes on the road and his hands either on the steering wheel or on a stick with a knob that stuck up between their seats, and so could not really communicate with Charlie. Seen through the open sides of his spectacles, the boy's eyes were more intensely focused than Charlie had ever known them to be. Music was playing loud, very loud, all around them. While they were still near the farm Dillis had turned the volume down for a moment to apologize for this. "I can't stand not to have music on when I'm driving. When I'm driving, I don't like to think."

There was something else that Dillis had done once he turned the car off of the long gravel drive at the farm onto the country highway. He reached into the small opening in front of Charlie ("that glove compartment door broke off a long time ago," he'd said, obscurely) and withdrew a small square package out of which he shook, awkwardly, with one free hand, a white paper stick which he then set fire to and sucked as it slowly turned to ash.

"Cigarette." He'd said to Charlie. "Don't tell Niniane. She'll probably smell it on me anyway. They *are* rotten for your lungs. That's why I don't smoke all the time. But I let myself have a few when I'm driving. I like to feel free."

Charlie sat in the passenger seat of Dillis' car throughout the slow, steady ride to the St. Clare's, and felt free, himself.

#

Dillis pulled into the parking lot of Our Lady of Pity and pointed out the statue on the treeless, sunburned lawn to Charlie. "That's how I knew there was a Catholic Church nearby," he said. "I remembered seeing that statue of Mary when I was on the way to the farm."

Charlie gazed at the statue for a moment. He could see it quite well through the holes in the side of the milk crate he was still hidden in. It seemed to him that the stone lady on the lawn with her hands cupped, palms out, to either side of her rippling gown, was preoccupied with the flowers around her feet. Her downward gaze was hardly inviting.

"Ready?" Said Dillis, peering into the crate.

Charlie nodded, though his comb and wattle had suddenly grown cold. He supposed he was as ready as he ever would be.

#

It was a modest church, a humble church, as Catholic churches go, with little of the ornate décor that Charlie had come to associate with Catholicism from the color pictures in The World Book. Set in a flat and treeless lot right off the highway, the two buildings that made up the whole complex of Our Lady of Pity were indistinguishable from the various warehouses and offices and such that flanked it along the side of the highway. Dillis, holding the milk crate against his torso like a Wise Man bearing a gift to the Christ Child, walked through the front door of the smaller building, which the priest had told him was the Rectory, and blinked in the sudden absence of sunlight. "Hello?" he called, into what he thought was the emptiness of the dim front room.

"Can I help you?" said a female voice jarringly close by.

Dillis jumped. Just ten feet in front of him a chinless and rather cachetic looking woman dressed in a pink blouse and a red cardigan sat dwarfed behind a mammoth wooden desk. She was peering at him suspiciously and her spiderlike hand was inching toward the phone on her desk.

“Yes...” Dillis squeaked. “I’m sorry I yelled... I couldn’t see. Umm... my name is Dillis Walksi, and I had an appointment to see Father Frank?”

The woman behind the desk’s eyes widened for a second, then the corners of her pencil line lips curved upward in a rather officious smile. “Oh yes,” she said. “Have a seat, please. I’ll let Father know you’re here.”

She pushed a button on her telephone, snatched up the receiver, and spoke into it with a voice all sweetness and light. “Father Carl, your One O’clock, Mr. Walksi has arrived.” She paused, her smile growing wider and revealing a line of small, too regular teeth. “Yes, Father,” she said, and hung up.

She pointed out a chair to Dillis, who still had not sat down. “Please have a seat,” she said. “Father will with you momentarily.”

Dillis nodded nervously, and perched on the edge of a chair set against the wall by the door, propping Charlie’s milk crate on his knees. He looked around the room at a number of small, antique looking wooden tables upon which were set unlit lamps, decorative boxes with Byzantine looking portraits on the lids, and thin, cheap looking magazines with titles like *St. Anthony’s Messenger* and *The Franciscan Herald*. There were windows on either side of him, but the Venetian blinds admitted only a dim, corrugated shadow of light into the room. He wanted to ask the woman why it was so dark in there, but her face was glowing in the light of the computer screen that she was staring fixedly into.

Dillis looked down at Charlie and tried to communicate, by raising his eyebrows, that everything was okay. The chicken held his gaze as if it were a lifeline.

After what seemed a long time, the dark wooden door to the left of the receptionists desk opened and the priest walked out. He was a stocky, swarthy man of medium height with somewhat disproportionately long arms and a wide, smooth, and yet pinched looking face above his roman collar. “Mr. Walski?” he said. “I’m Father Carl Frank. Please come in.”

- -

Dillis stood and entered the priest's office, which was lit as brightly as the world outside. The large windows behind the priest's enormous and cluttered desk were unblinded, affording a view of the meager and deserted playground behind the church. Dillis stood in front of the desk, holding his milk crate, until the priest closed the door behind them and motioned for him to sit down.

"Please have a seat, Mr. Walksi. What's that you have in that crate?" The priest peered into Charlie's conveyance as he passed Dillis on his way to his desk. "Is that a chicken?" He said. "Well, of course it is," he answered himself. "Is there some reason you've brought your chicken along with you, Mr. Walski?"

"It's not my chicken," said Dillis, sitting down and balancing the crate on his knees. "It's my girlfriend's chicken. I told her I'd take him to the vet after I got through here."

The priest raised one thick eyebrow. "Nothing serious, I hope," he said smiling.

"No, just a routine checkup," said Dillis, and looked down at Charlie. He felt already as if the conversation were getting out of hand. He cleared his throat several times.

"Uhh, I guess, I guess I better start by saying that I want what I tell you today to be just between us. I mean... I guess what I'm trying to say is that I have a confession to make." He looked up at the priest and pulled his lips in between his teeth.

The priest leaned back in his swivel chair and looked at Dillis the way you might look at a total stranger that has walked up to you and proposed marriage. "Confess?" the priest said. "But you said on the phone that you aren't Catholic. That you're Jewish, in fact, if I remember right. Why would you feel the need to make a confession?"

Dillis gripped the handles of Charlie's milk crate. "Does that matter? If I'm Jewish, I mean? If I have a confession to make? Is it only good if I'm a Christian already?"

"I wouldn't say that," said the priest. "But I don't think you understand what Confession—in the context of the Church—really means. These days we call it the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which mean that we confess in order to be reconciled to God, and to our neighbor, and to the Church. And if you aren't a member of the Church, then..." he spread out his hands above his desk. "Well, it's not the way we do things.

You're jumping the gun, to use an old expression. In order to be reconciled to a community, you first have to be a part of that community. Do you see what I mean?"

Dillis' leg, underneath the milk crate, began to jiggle uncontrollably. He searched his mind for another tack to take. "Well what if..." he said. "What if I have something I need to get off my chest before I do something like join the Church. What if I want my conscience clean before I do something like that? Can you hear my confession then?" He looked up at the priest hopefully.

The priest put his hands behind his head and gazed across the desk at the clearly rattled young man before him. After sixteen years of ordained ministry and four excruciating years in this godforsaken rural parish smack in the middle of the diocese's most xenophobic Baptist stronghold, Father Carl Frank had been forced to deal with many off the wall situations, but a chicken toting, guilt-ridden young Jew was, even for Our Lady of Pity, seemed almost too bizarre to be real. He began to get suspicious.

"Mr. Walksi," he said, leaning forward and lowering his heavy eyebrows. "The Sacrament of Reconciliation is one of a number of the Sacraments of the Church, and they are all interconnected. They can't be taken in isolation. I'm afraid you cannot just demand the Sacrament out of some sense of personal guilt. Your desire must grow out of your commitment to the Catholic faith. We take this very seriously, Mr. Walski. Confession is one of the cornerstones of our faith. It is not a game."

"I know that! I know!" said Dillis. "I don't think it's a game, really! You've got to believe me! I know it's serious. I just thought, that maybe there was some way... I mean, I have something that I need confess, and it's urgent..." Dillis began to feel frantic, and the milk crate began to shake violently with the motion of his jiggling knees. "I guess I better leave." He said, half to the priest and half to Charlie.

The priest held out his hand. "Mr. Walski, wait a minute. I'm just trying to impress upon you the seriousness of what you're proposing. If you are truly sincere about exploring the possibility of reception into the Catholic Church, I'll be more than willing to listen to what you have to say..."

"I am!" Dillis said. "I totally am serious!"

"As I was saying..." the priest frowned, "I am willing to listen to what you have to say, and you may consider our conversation to be protected by pastoral confidentiality."

That's not the same as the seal of Confession, which is inviolable, but it will ensure that whatever you wish to divulge to me will remain between us unless it involves the threat of harm to yourself or any other person. Will that be acceptable?"

"I don't know," said Dillis. He looked down into the milk crate. "I honestly don't know. Can I have a minute alone to think about it?"

The priest rolled his eyes. "Of course," he said. "Why don't I just..."

Inside the crate, Charlie motioned to Dillis by opening and closing his beak. As the priest watched, Dillis stuck his hand into the crate and seemed to lapse into a kind of fugue state, staring blankly into space, and moving his lips slowly as if he were Daniel puzzling over some writing on the wall that no one else could see.

"All right," he said, after a minute of this. He looked the puzzled priest straight in the eye. "That's all right, then. If you can promise me what I'm about to tell you will stay between us until I tell you different."

"You have my word," said Father Frank. "So long as you are clear about the limits of confidentiality..."

"You bet," said the boy. He took a deep breath. "All right then. Father, get ready, because this is going to blow your mind. I guess the best way to put it is that there has been a miracle, and I have the proof of it right here. There's been a miracle on my girlfriend's farm, and it involves this chicken." He lifted Charlie out of the box and smiled at him, then turned him to face the incredulous priest. "Father, this is Charlie. Umm... can I set him on your desk?"

The priest nodded dumbly.

Dillis set Charlie on a clear space near the corner of the priest's cluttered desk, next to a square stone paperweight with the letters 'K of C' embossed into a gold medallion set into its center. "Now, I know you're not going to believe this, because I didn't either, at first, so just try not to jump to conclusions. Just try and think of this as a miracle, and then maybe, for you, it'll be easier to take. Father, I need you to hold out your hand... palm up, like this, and put it over here where Charlie can reach it."

Father Frank's dark, baggy eyes narrowed. "Mr. Walski, I told you that I'm not interested in playing games..."

“Please!” Dillis begged. “Just give me a chance! Don’t you believe in miracles?”

“Yes,” the priest growled. “And I also believe in not wasting my time with stupid pet tricks. Save it for TV, Mr. Walski. You may not realize it, but I am a busy man. I am responsible for over 200 families in this community...”

“Please!” Dillis held his hands clasped together in front of his face like a criminal begging for mercy. “You’ve got to believe me!”

The priest’s cheeks inflated, and his swarthy skin deepened in color. He reached for the phone, and then, a glance into Dillis’ face that was meant to further intimidate the boy detected in it the unmistakable presence of real desperation. Father Frank sighed volubly and closed his eyes. “All right, Mr. Walksi. What is it you want from me?”

Dillis stroked Charlie’s head and back. “If you just hold your hand out... like this... yes. All right, go ahead Charlie.”

Charlie bent over and touched his beak to the large, fleshy, somewhat damp palm of the priest. He hesitated. For some reason, this point of contact impressed him with a sense of its enormity. Once he scratched a message onto the palm of this human being, his life would change irrevocably. He had no idea how this stranger would react to him, and there was none of the sense that he had had before with Dillis and the aunts, that no matter what, Niniane was in control. Charlie wished, now, that he had let her come along, but it was too late. He gritted his beak and said a silent prayer, than began tracing letters onto the palm of the priest.

“What is it doing?” The priest looked at Charlie, then Dillis. “Tickling me?”

“That’s how he talks,” said Dillis. “Father, Charlie can write. And he can read. Just like any human being. My girlfriend taught him how. Now, if that’s not a miracle, I don’t know what is!”

The priest began to laugh. He removed his hand out from under Charlie’s beak and covered his broad forehead with it. He laughed for a long time, then bent his head over his desk and groaned. “Oh my God.” he said. “Son, you have made my day.”

“You believe it! Already?” Dillis was amazed.

The priest started to chuckle again. “Oh, I believe all right. I believe you’re a very talented young man. And tenacious, too. It couldn’t have been easy to teach a chicken how to do that. They’re notoriously stupid creatures.”

“But it wasn’t me! It was my girlfriend. Listen, it’s not a trick. He’s not just... repeating. He’s not a parrot! I mean, that’s what I thought too, at first. But he’s different, Father, I swear. He has his own thoughts, and everything. And in fact... well, the real reason we’re here... he’ll tell you himself, is... he wants to be baptized. It isn’t me that wants to be a Catholic... no offence... it’s Charlie. Tell him, Charlie.”

But Charlie couldn’t say a word, because the priest had his hands over his eyes and was laughing again. His face, in fact, had grown so red that Dillis became concerned. Finally the hysterical priest settled down into mild chuckles and wiped his eyes. “This chicken wants to be baptized,” he said. “That is priceless. You’re not just talented, Mr. Walski. You’re a genius. Wait ‘till I tell the Bishop...”

“No!” Dillis stood up so fast that the milk crate tumbled to the floor with a clatter! “You *promised!* You gave us your *word!* You can’t tell *anybody!*”

“Good God! Mr. Walski! Calm down!” The priest’s jaw slackened. The boy in front of him was absolutely, genuinely horrified. The pupils of his eyes, behind those smudgy lenses, were dilated with panic. He looked like someone who had just been told his only child had been kidnapped. And, the priest realized, he had said ‘us.’ He had actually referred, without even thinking, to himself and the chicken as ‘us.’ As if he had a relationship with the chicken that was as vital and intimate as that between two human beings. This young man, Father Frank thought, may be psychotic, but he is not joking. For him, if for no one else, the chicken was another person. Father Frank put his hand on the boy’s shoulder to calm him. “All right,” he said slowly, calmly. “You’re right. I promised. I won’t say anything. Sit down, Dillis. Don’t worry. Let’s see what Charlie has to say.”

And the priest lay his hand down, palm up, in front of Charlie, who scratched his greeting. *Hello. My name is Charlie. Will you please Baptize me?*

When they got home, Niniane, having heard the car crunching into the long driveway like a hungry monster, was perched on the square of concrete stoop in front of the front door to intercept them.

Charlie opened his beak in the direction of Niniane. She held out her arms and Dillis transferred the chicken into them.

*I'm going to bed.* Charlie scratched into her palm.

Niniane, her eyes wide, looked at Dillis, who shook his head slowly. "He wants to go to bed." Said Niniane. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"Let's just go inside," Dillis said, very carefully. "Niniane, there's nothing to get upset about. Everything's all right. Charlie's just worn out. And so am I, to tell you the truth."

They walked around the house and went in through the sliding glass door, avoiding May and Irene, who were in the kitchen. Niniane lay Charlie in his dresser drawer and looked down at him with anxiety. He had never lain in her arms so listlessly before. She stood and Dillis motioned her over to him. He put his arm around her shoulder.

She turned to face him. "What happened, Dillis!" she whispered. "He's upset!"

"He's just tired," Dillis guided her towards the sofa he slept on every night. "He has a lot to think about."

"Like what?" she hissed, shimmying out of his grasp. "Was the priest an asshole? Dillis, is he going to run his mouth? Are they going to take Charlie away?"

"Calm down! Niniane, I told you, it wasn't going to be like that. Don't you ever listen to me? Jesus, if that priest was going to spill the beans, do you think we would have just come right back here? Give me some credit! Look, it's going to be okay. It just wasn't what Charlie was expecting, that's all."

Niniane slumped and held her face in her hands for a moment. She wanted all at once to kiss Dillis and break every bone in his body. What he said made sense. If Charlie is in any danger from this priest, then Dillis would not have brought him back to the most obvious place he would be. Still, Charlie was upset—very upset—about *something*. He wasn't just 'worn out.'

“What do you mean it wasn’t what he expected?” Niniane waved one slim brown arm over the back of the sofa at Charlie. “What’s wrong with him? He isn’t even going to eat?”

Dillis took her flailing hand and held it for as long as she would let him. “Leave him alone,” he said. “Come on in the kitchen, and I’ll tell you what happened. Let the poor bird rest, for Pete’s sake.”

#

Charlie lay awake in the dim living room, listening to the comforting murmur of voices from the kitchen. He knew they were talking about him, and he was mildly astonished at his lack of interest in the conversation. Hearing the relatively low tones of Dillis' subdued, boyish voice he could basically guess what was being said. Dillis was telling the women what happened at Our Lady of Pity. The only thing Charlie found the least bit perplexing was the complete silence of the two aunts.

After a long time the lights went off in the kitchen, and everybody went to bed; the three women padding in their bare feet through the living room to the stairs so as not to wake Charlie. Dillis, stripped to his shorts and a T-shirt lay, snoring and uncovered, on the couch. Charlie rose and stuck his head between the curtains to gaze out the sliding glass door.

The night was overcast, and a blurred sickle mood hung overhead. Charlie thought it looked like it was under water, it seemed to shimmer like Niniane when she was swimming. He stared at it awhile, his mind strangely, stagnant and numb. Then, out of the blue and with a vengeance, the consciousness of what had occurred after he had scratched his request for Baptism into Father Frank’s palm returned to him.

#

Despite Dillis’ attempts at preparation, it had taken Father Frank awhile to catch on to what Charlie was doing to the palm of his hand. For a while he simply sat there with his palm outstretched and his massive eyebrows drawn so close together they almost

met over the bridge of his prominent nose. “What is he doing?” the priest said to Dillis. “Is he spelling something?”

“Yes!” Dillis was standing over Charlie now, his hand lightly touching the chicken’s back. “One letter at a time. Go slow, Charlie, like you did with me at first.”

Charlie repeated his request, but the Priest only shrugged. “I don’t know...” he said.

Dillis began to feel panicked again. He lifted his hand from Charlie’s back and cracked his knuckles. “Try all caps, Charlie.”

Charlie repeated his request once again, this time in large capital letters, each one taking up the entire width and length of the priest’s palm. By the time Charlie began to spell the word ‘baptize,’ the palm began to tense up underneath the pressure of his beak, and he knew the priest finally understood. He looked up to see the priest staring at him with his mouth and eyes wide open.

Suddenly the priest jerked his palm away, collapsed into his swivel chair, and backed up in it against the wall behind his desk. Charlie watched, dumfounded as the priest bent over and began to make a horrible, heaving noise that was followed by the sound of thick liquid splashing on the hardwood floor.

“Holy Shit!” Dillis said. “He’s barfing!”

Grabbing Charlie, Dillis bolted to the door. Then he remembered the milk crate. He ran back, picked it up, and glanced at the priest, who was still retching behind his desk. “Father Frank... are you okay? I’ll get your secretary... just let me put Charlie back in his box.”

The priest only retched and groaned, and Dillis stood paralyzed with Charlie in one arm and the milk crate in the other. Finally Father Frank raised his head to reveal a mottled and sweaty face.

“Go...” he said, between tiny moans and heavy gasps. “Go to the church... wait for me in there...” he retched again “... just leave me alone for a minute...and... and tell Mrs. O’Connor to find the mop and bucket, leave it outside my door, and go home for the rest of the day.”

Dillis nodded, put Charlie in his crate, and gave the priests instructions to his secretary, who spluttered questions at the back of the boy as he and Charlie exited the

dark foyer of the rectory. Dillis ran across the stretch of gravel and grass that separated the church building from the rectory and struggled with the heavy wooden door that opened into a dim and aromatic sanctuary. As the door inched to a close behind him, Dillis took a deep breath. It had been a long time since he'd been inside a church or synagogue, and it amazed him how much the same they all seemed, no matter how different they were. They all had a smell, not a uniform odor, but a smell peculiar to themselves, and they all looked better when uninhabited. Dillis lifted Charlie out of the crate so he could look around.

It was difficult for Charlie to see much in the darkness, but the smell affected him. At first it was somewhat overpowering, and for the second time that afternoon, he thought he might pass out. But Dillis grip around and beneath him was steady, and by the time Dillis slipped into one of the wooden pews near the front of the church and set Charlie down beside him, Charlie was so at ease that he trotted all the way down the length of the pew and back in order to get a closer look at the stained glass window that overlooked them.

*It's very peaceful in here.* He scratched into Dillis' palm. *But too dark. It's a little scary.*

Dillis nodded. He looked over at the stained glass window that Charlie had gone over to investigate; it depicted a white bearded man with golden skin dressed in what looked like an emerald-green hooded toga. The man's long, tapered, slim fingered hands were cupped against one another in front of his chest, and underneath his long, slim bare feet a purple banner with yellow letters unfurled.

"Athanasius Contra Mundi," Dillis read. "Whatever that means."

There was a brief flash of light behind them, and they turned. The priest had arrived and was walking slowly down the center aisle toward them. Dillis stood up.

The priest grunted and waved him back down. "Move down," he said, edging into the pew. "And put that chicken between us."

"He's called Charlie..."

The priest sighed. "Yes. Set him right here... if he doesn't mind. I'd like him to scratch... once again, and slowly, please... what he was scratching into my hand before I... was indisposed. "

Once again, Charlie spelled out, slowly and carefully, his request for baptism. As he did so, the priest's head swerved back and forth on his shoulders, but he held his hand steady. When Charlie had finished, the priest lifted his hand to his face and gazed at his palm as if he had never seen it before.

"Unbelievable." He whispered, his head still shaking from side to side on his short, thick neck. "Just unbelievable. This has got to be a dream."

"It's not." Said Dillis quickly. For some reason the mere suggestion that what he knew to be real might be merely a dream that someone else was having made him angry. He gulped. "Father Frank," he said, his voice ringing throughout the sanctuary, "you have to get a grip. This is for real. Charlie wants to be a Catholic, and I think you need to do whatever it is you have to do to make that happen. I know it's strange and all, but stranger things have happened, haven't they? I mean, look at Jesus! Walking on water, casting demons into pigs... next to all that, Charlie's not such a big deal, is he? And what about all your saints..."

Father Frank held up his hands. "Please..." he said. "I don't mean to be so... incredulous. But this... this is so amazing! It's totally unprecedented, don't you see? If this chicken... if this chicken really can communicate... I mean, communicate out of its own experience, of its own free will... well, that changes everything! If this chicken, by some bizarre twist of fate, really came to an understanding of the message of the Gospel, and decided to make a profession of faith, do you know what that would mean? It would mean that this chicken had a *soul*, for Goodness' sake!"

"Well, of course he has a soul!" said Dillis, indignantly. "That's the whole point, isn't it! And he wants it baptized, so he can be a Catholic. What do we need to do next? Can you do it right now? That would be great."

The priest reared back against the arm of the pew. "Right now!" he barked. "Right now! You've got to be crazy! This is a chicken we're talking about here! We don't even baptize a human *being* until after at least six months of catechesis! I'd have to speak to the Bishop before I'd even *think* about enrolling this bird into RCIA! And *then*, my God, what a scene *that* would be!" The priest stared past them at some scene in his mind and after a moment started to shake with laughter. "Oh, this can't be happening. It just can't be happening."

Charlie, who had been perched between the priest and Dillis but unable to put a word in because the two of them were too busy talking at each other to notice him, suddenly stood, stretched out his wings, and crowed. The raucous, jagged noise reverberated through the sanctuary like the blast of a trumpet, and they both looked down at him with expression of utter surprise, the priest because he still could not imagine that Charlie could really be listening, and Dillis because such a show of spunk was quite unlike Charlie.

“What is it, Charlie,” said Dillis, holding out his palm.

Charlie shook his head and turned to the priest. “He wants your hand,” said Dillis.

The priest gulped and extended his palm.

*All I want, he wrote. Is to be baptized like everyone else. I don't want to change everything.* He lifted his head and looked up at the troubled face of the priest.

Father Frank's dark and bloodshot eyes grew shiny with emotion. “I believe you,” he said quietly. “But it's not that simple. I can't just baptize anybody who asks... unless, of course, its an emergency. But under normal circumstances, the Church has very definite procedures...”

*So these are normal circumstances?* Scratched Charlie hopefully.

“No,” the priest smiled a wan smile. “But it's not an emergency, either. You're not dying, are you?”

*I hope not!* Said Charlie.

Father Frank closed his eyes and after a moment realized that he was praying. God, his silent thoughts pronounced, please let this be real. Either I'm going crazy or this little chicken has been sent to rebuild your church!

He opened his eyes. “May I ask you something, Charlie?”

Charlie nodded.

“Why Catholicism? You know, don't you, that there are many denominations. Why did you choose the Catholic Church?”

*Transubstantiation,* Charlie scratched promptly. He had come across the word in Von Hugel, and he believed in what that theologian said it meant with all his heart, as it concurred completely with what Wittgenstein had stated that Catholics believe.

My God, Father Frank thought, not only can he communicate, but he can even spell correctly! Half the adults in this diocese probably can't spell communion, much less transubstantiation!

"What about transubstantiation, Charlie?" he said.

*I think it explains a lot.*

"What do you mean?"

Charlie thought, suddenly, of his mother. Would she really have left him to starve? Or had she, through some wordless animal instinct, known that Niniane would come along to take care of him and deliver him unto a world in which he could not merely survive? Had all this, had all the fear and pain and uncertainty he'd known in the past been foreordained? He wondered if he would ever know.

He scratched into the palm of the priest a phrase he once heard May intone, which had struck him.

*Things are not always as they seem.*

"I've never thought of it that way," said Father Frank. "But your right. I'm not sure, though, that it implies a Christian understanding of the doctrine. It is the body and blood of Christ that are offered in the Mass. Do you know what that means?"

*That God can do anything.*

There was a long silence. Beside them, Dillis sat, vigilant, transfixed. He couldn't see what Charlie was saying, but he felt proud of Charlie anyway.

Father Frank was the first to break the silence. "You're a true gift, Charlie," he said. "I'm so glad you've come to see me. I wish I could give you what you want without reserve, but you must understand that there are many things... many other factors to consider. I understand your desire to be discreet, and I agree that it is important, but I really feel that I should consult with my superiors regarding this matter. I promise you that I'll do everything in my power to make sure your privacy and safety aren't compromised. Can I have your permission to speak with my Bishop about you?"

Charlie looked at Dillis, who drew his lips between his teeth and widened his eyes. Charlie regarded the priest, whose dark face seemed to glow with emotion, and nodded.

*Whatever it takes to baptize me, he scratched, do it.*

The priest took a deep breath. He sat up and squared his shoulders against the back of the pew. He lifted his hand and briefly touched the growing comb on Charlie's head. "I'll be in touch," he said, and stood. Dillis scooped up Charlie and they left the priest in the church then, presumably praying.

#

Dillis pronounced the meeting a success, but Charlie, though he did not say so, felt the lack of an assurance he had vaguely expected to receive. The priest's ominous phrase "This will change everything!" Rang like a death knell in Charlie's brain. All he wanted was to be baptized. He didn't want it to change anything.

Charlie rested his comb against the cool glass of the door. He stood in this dejected position for a long time, feeling only that somehow, through his own need, he had once again upset an equilibrium that he did not know existed. Was this his fate? To forever want the wrong things, and to want them desperately, as if not only his life, but something far more consequential than that depended upon his having them? He heard again in his mind's ear, the priest's dire prophecy. "This will change *everything!*" Just remembering the expression of dismay with which the priest had pronounced this judgment triggered something in Charlie. He lifted his head from the cool glass pane and looked directly at his own reflection. He's wrong! He thought. Priests don't know everything. Well, maybe he's not exactly *wrong*, but he's exaggerating. If I'm baptized, it won't change *everything*. Charlie returned to his drawer. He thought now that he could sleep. The realization that, after all, it was not such the big deal that the priest, justifiably made it out to seem was intensely comforting. Charlie closed his eyes, grateful that he had managed to acquire a degree of perspective regarding his situation. Yes, he was a special case, in some respects, but he was certainly not going to *change everything*. Only God could do that, he considered, and God, he was, Thank God, not.

#

Back in his rectory apartment, Fr. Frank lay in a very warm bath with a very dirty martini. He must relax deeply, he told himself, in order to have any hope of getting some sleep after such an encounter with- there was no other word for it- the miraculous. It had all been very disturbing. After Mrs. O'Connor had barged into his office with the mop, Father Frank thought fast and told her he must have had food poisoning. She, capable and effusive woman that she was when it came to clergy, had called the sexton to take care of the mess and had led Father Frank into one of the conference rooms where there was a row of six plush chairs upon which he lay for a good twenty minutes, trying to pray. In times of extreme stress, it was Father Frank's gift to be equipped with a tentative but sure sense of the presence, within the painful and contradictory, of God. He felt that this gift was necessary in his situation as a basically urbane priest in the most inert of rural parishes, and without it, he would have long ago taken to drinking even more than the one binge a week he normally allowed himself. As it was, the consolations of prayer had been wearing thin lately, but he turned to them now in desperation. His head throbbed and his bowels felt as if they had turned to lard. What, he'd implored his cloudy sense of the numinous as he lay flat on his back on the row of chairs in the darkened conference room, was going on with this chicken?

He'd gone through it all, then, in short order, all the possibilities. The kid was a psychotic savant with a knack for animal training. He himself was in the midst of a delusion. This was a case of demonic infestation. The end result, no matter what, was bound to be humiliating. This is a nightmare. He'd said to God. What am I supposed to do with a chicken? Miracle or not, I don't want to deal with it. Joke or not, it isn't funny. This is just too much, he said, take it from me. I swear I'll stop drinking. I hate you God, he'd said, I hate this church, I hate the church, I hate life. I hate everything.

Thus he struggled with his God. And as is the case with all righteous struggle with the divine, there came in the end a sense of surrender, and with that understanding, and with that the strength to struggle with the world. He sat up and heard the voice of his own convictions with absolute clarity. Get up, go to the church, talk to the boy, to his bird if necessary. This is why you are a minister of the gospel, this is your responsibility. No matter what. No matter what this turns out be in the long run, it is waiting, in the sanctuary of your church, for you.

And thus he'd made it to the church, where he'd learned from Charlie all about his surprisingly precise, if limited, amateur theological investigations. And though he had his doubts, the more he learned, the more incredible sense it all began to make. The chicken spoke, (or, rather, wrote) as others he'd met in his life who, despite significant odds, achieved a remarkable degree of spiritual maturity that contradicted lifestyles and personalities that were manifestly degraded. Drug addicts, prostitutes, violent criminals, many of these, he'd noticed, displayed, one got to know them, a core of absolute theological certainty that left him dumfounded. He recalled a woman he'd met once during his internship as a hospital chaplain in Washington D.C.; a wreck of a woman, riddled with hepatitis, addicted to crack, petty, suspicious and demanding. She had been, on top of, and in spite of all that, a staunch Pentecostal. She'd been contemptuous of him as a Roman Catholic Priest, but seemed to recognize in him something of the man of God to whom she could deliver her soul in part, if not totally. The nurses in the ward had requested that he see her in the hopes that his company would distract her enough to keep her from harassing them for more pain medication than she needed. In this, he'd been unsuccessful, but she'd been perfectly happy to have him in the room while she pestered the nurses, and they'd spent one afternoon amusing themselves with a child's book of bible puzzles that had been left by a candy stripper. She'd looked at him that day, while he'd been encircling, with unconscious and childlike absorption, the name of the prophet Elijah in a word find, and she'd said, in a voice at once like and unlike her usual ravaged, smoky whisper, that God would send him a healing. "I've been lower than dirt," she'd said. "But where there's God, there's always a way. There's nothing God can't do. Nothing."

He set his glass on the porcelain edge of the tub, closed his eyes, sank a bit lower in the now lukewarm water, submerging that body of his that was becoming, as the years flew past, distressingly meaty and cumbersome. He was tired, and he had too much experience of the stubborn nature of human folly to harbor any romantic religious illusions. For all of her reckless, if beautiful 'faith', chances were that woman in D.C. had died as wretchedly as she had lived, lacking any degree of restraint. God's ways are not our ways, he reminded himself. You have no reason to think you have the answers. "Tomorrow," he said, aloud, "I'll call the Bishop. He'll know what to do."

He finished off his martini and went to bed.

## Chapter Eleven/ Catechumenate

Life on the farm assumed an accelerated pace as Charlie prepared himself for further inquisitions like the one he faced at Our Lady of Pity. He thought it would help him feel more competent as a potential Christian if he read the bible from cover to cover, but May, who had gone to Sunday School against her will until she put her foot down at the age of thirteen, warned him that much of what made up the bible was profoundly boring. The only bible in the house was the obstinate looking, backwoods sounding, black leather bound King James Bible that reminded Niniane of her grandfather, and which had, in fact, belonged to him for much of his long and cantankerous life. They discussed it over cards one evening, and after a moment of staring into space with the flat expression of somebody who is struggling with the question of whether or not to disclose some uncomfortable truth, May left the game without a word and marched up one flight of stairs to the second floor, then another flight to the attic. She returned holding a book about the size of a volume of the World Book and bound in a brightly illustrated cover. She sat down, laid the book flat, and pushed it across the table over to Charlie.

He read the title to himself. *The Bible Story*. Beneath the golden lettered title there was a vividly colored illustration of a bearded man in flowing violet robes standing near the summit of a mountain holding two curiously shaped plaques above his head. The expression of the man's face communicated an intense displeasure. Beneath him a multicolored congregation of hooded, turbaned, and bare human heads stared up at the man and his plaques as if he held them spellbound. It was a picture Charlie could look at, he thought, for hours. What on earth was going on in it?

May reached over and opened the book for him. "It's full of pictures," she said. "and the writing is very simple. Not that you can't read on a more advanced level, Charlie, but I think this would be the best way to get the basics before you try to read the real thing. These books... there's a whole set of them... are the closest I ever came to

liking the bible.” She looked at Niniane and smiled. “Your grandmother got them for me and your mom when we were little girls, and we used to look at them for hours. Even before we really knew how to read. The pictures... of course they’re ridiculously eurocentric... but they’re marvelous anyway. They make you want to know the whole story. They’re so expressive! Theirs one in the last volume... I think it’s a picture of the Good Samaritan... and even the Samaritan’s donkey has a sad look on his face when they come across the Jew who was beaten and robbed. I’d forgotten all about this old set! But just now I remembered that I saw them in the attic when me and Irene moved in. They’re all yours, Charlie. I think there’s ten of them in all. We’ll get the rest tomorrow.”

While May was reminiscing, Niniane and Dillis left their seats and went to stand on either side of Charlie, looking over his tiny head at Volume One of *The Bible Story*. Every few seconds Niniane reached over and turned a page. The pictures, she had to admit, were fascinating. In one of the first ones, a naked man, his privates strategically obscured by the position of his thigh, lay fast asleep on the ground while a disembodied hand traced a bloodless incision at the bottom of his ribcage. “Womb envy,” Niniane sneered, but her hand lingered for a bit before she turned that page.

The next day May presented Charlie with the entire set of *The Bible Story* and by the end of the week he had skimmed through all of them. He found that he was particularly drawn to those stories, such as Jonah and the Whale, and Balaam’s Ass, and Christ’s casting of a legion of demons into a herd of swine, which involved animals as either direct or indirect agents of revelation. From the reaction of Father Frank to him, Charlie would never have thought that non-humans played any sort of speaking part in the bible, and when he mentioned this to Dillis, the boy told him that the priest probably hadn’t read the whole bible, as Catholics tended to think the bible was less important than the Pope.

This unnerved Charlie somewhat, but he decided not to dwell on it. His sense of the papacy, garnered from the description of the harrowing history of that office in the World Book, was that through the centuries it was steadily becoming less presumptuous, and would soon gracefully retire itself in favor of a more democratic system of government. Dillis’ comment gave him pause, and he resolved to take up the issue with Father Frank as soon as they heard back from that priest.

For his part, Father Frank, true to his word and to his prudent character, was taking up the question of Charlie's baptism with his immediate superior.

"Vinnie, has anything like this ever come up before?" asked Father Frank of the Bishop, whose name was Vincent Serxner but who, despite his vocation and ecclesiastical status, had a dislike of excessive formality.

"Not as far as I know," said the Bishop. He was a thin, if paunchy older gentleman with cotton white hair sprayed into a stiff cap that covered his large bald spot like a papal beanie. "I keep asking myself, how could this be? And then I ask, why me? Why in my diocese, of all places. Just when the whole sex abuse business is starting to blow over. A catholic chicken is the last thing we need. Why couldn't it have been born again, or something! Are you sure about this Carl? You really don't think it's some stunt?"

"As sure as I can be," said Father Frank. He was nursing a glass of iced tea in his office. He had not had a drop of alcohol since the day after meeting Charlie, and found that he was constantly and pleasantly thirsty for other forms of libation. "You'll see what I mean when you meet him. When I'm not right there with him, I start to think I'm crazy, but when he was actually writing in my palm... well, it's like I could tell, somehow, that he could really understand what he was saying. And even talking to the boy... I don't know. It's just obvious that to him, this chicken is really another person. He treats it like-like a little brother, really. Not like a pet at all. It's uncanny..."

"Mother of God," groaned the Bishop. "You're sure they haven't told anyone else? Just you? No reporters? No neighbors? The girl's parents? Anybody?"

"As sure as I can be," said Father Frank. "Just the boy knows, and the girl, the aunts, and me, and now you. At least that's what the boy and the chicken told me. They're afraid something will happen to the bird if word gets out."

"They're right about that," said the Bishop. "The secular media would have a field day. A chicken who wants to be baptized Catholic! They'd be on us like... like white on rice, as the people down here would say. This is top secret, Carl. Until I figure out what's what, I don't want you to say anything to anybody." There was a moment of silence. "Except your confessor, of course."

Father Frank rolled his eyes and smiled, and gazed at the merrily sparkling ice in his glass of tea. "Don't worry," he said. "I'll keep it under my hat. See you Friday."

"God Bless." Said the Bishop, mechanically, and hung up.

#

When the Bishop called, May answered the phone. The Bishop introduced himself in deep, silky pastoral tones and asked if he might call on Charlie at the farm. "That's up to Charlie," May told him. "We'll call you back."

She took his number and went outside to where Dillis, Niniane, and Charlie were all perched indolently of the back porch swing. They weren't even reading. It was a clear, terribly hot day and the sun, shimmering heartlessly above them in the blank blue sky seemed to draw all the life force on earth unto itself. May held the loose collar of her dress between thumb and forefinger and drew it away, then toward her chest in order to fan her face. She thrust her chin out at Charlie. "A Bishop just called," she said. "Name of Vincent. He wants to come here and talk to you."

Charlie's wings stirred. It had been nearly a week since his trip to Our Lady of Pity, so enough time had passed for the idea of another person knowing about his existence to seem alarming and risky. He opened his beak and May held her palm out. *By himself?* He scratched.

"If that's what you want." Said May.

Charlie nodded. He glanced at Niniane, who's face was turned sharply to the left, away from him, so that she appeared to be staring intently at the rather grimy white aluminum siding of the farmhouse. He could see, on either side of her thick ponytail, that the muscles of the back of her neck were tensed. Timidly, he reached over with his beak and lightly pecked her leg. She turned to look at him.

"What?"

*Is that all right?* He scratched into her palm.

"It isn't my decision, Charlie."

*I want you to be there this time.* He scratched. *I want him to meet you.*

Niniane was silent. A phrase came to her mind from some source she could not place, and she found it irritating. "Whither thou goest, I will go..."

She scowled. The remainder of the phrase dwindled off into the forgotten, but the first six words circled over the landscape of her memory like a bird of prey. "I don't like this, Charlie. It's getting out of hand. A stranger... coming *here*... I can't just sit there and pretend I'm happy to see him..."

Charlie had her palm in front of him, but he could not bring himself to scratch his immediate thought: But he's not a stranger to *me*... he's a Christian...

*I don't want you to pretend. But you could help me. I'm getting scared too. I want to be baptized, but what if he wants to take me away? I want you there with me. I want you all there. And Irene.*

It took Charlie a long time to scratch all this, and as he did so, an image arose in Niniane's mind of Jesus, looking like a sinister, snickering, berobed, bearded hippie holding Charlie captive in a pillowcase: Jesus, the chicken thief. She felt a surge of hot hatred for the Lord. She held her breath, then repeated Charlie's words to Dillis and her aunt.

"We'll be there, Charlie," Dillis assured him. "No one's going to take you away from here without going through me first."

Niniane rolled her eyes and sighed. "It's not too late to call it off, Charlie," though deep down she knew it was too late. She saw the ordeal ahead play out before her like a game of chess. Once the first move was made, no matter how incremental, the game began and would not end until a winner was declared. She had a sinking feeling that the winner of this game would be that sneaky, unreal Jesus, and not Charlie.

Charlie shook his head, then nodded at Irene. She went inside and called the Bishop. They made arrangements for him to come to the farm Friday afternoon—the very next day.

#

The Bishop parked his gray Mercedes behind Dillis' Plymouth Duster and stepped out onto the gravel driveway. The farmhouse stood before him, its garage door open like

a choking mouth, displaying a chaos of farm implements, old bicycles, lawn and garden bags, and cardboard boxes inside. While the Bishop stood, peering into that chaotic darkness, a human figure began to move within and then proceed from it. It was a young man, the Bishop saw, tall, thin, with stringy brown hair and round eyeglasses. The Bishop stepped forward. "You must be Dillis," he said, offering his hand.

Dillis, noting the Bishop's large ring, wondered if he was supposed to kiss it. He shook it instead, and was relieved to feel the pressure of the Bishop's returning shake.

"Yes, sir," said Dillis. "I'm Dillis Walksi. The others are inside. Just follow me."

The bishop looked back at the driveway. "Where's Father Frank? I don't see his car."

"I don't know, sir. I guess he's running late."

The Bishop followed Dillis into the messy garage, then through a screen door in the right corner of it that opened into the kitchen of the farmhouse. Through the kitchen into the living room he could then see two middle-aged women sitting on a sofa, a young girl in a rather tattered brown recliner, and in her lap- even after all he'd heard, it still seemed absurd- a young male chicken.

Dillis preceded the Bishop into the living room. "The Bishop," said Dillis, ceremoniously. The two women on the sofa looked at one another, looked at the Bishop, smiled, and nodded. "Have a seat," said Irene, indicating a rocker across the coffee table." "I'm Irene. Part-owner."

The other woman, rose and offered her hand. It was worn and yet delicate, with surprisingly soft, pale skin, like the hands of women who spend their lives tending children. "I'm May Blattery," she said. "Thank you for coming. Can I get you anything?"

"No thank you, Ms. Blattery." Said the Bishop. He shook her hand and sat down. He turned to the girl with the chicken in her lap. "And you must be Niniane."

Niniane swallowed, smiled, nodded. "Hello." She managed to say. She had expected a dignitary in flowing robes and a tall white hat. This man, in his sansabelt pants, loafers, and knit shirt looked like someone her father would play golf with. It was unnerving.

The Bishop nodded at the chicken in her lap. "And this is Charlie?"

Dillis had come around to stand beside the recliner. "Yes sir," he said.

"Well," said the Bishop, aware that his face was coloring as he addressed the chicken personally. "I've head a lot about you Charlie."

To the Bishop, at least, it seemed as if the next moment was an eternity of extremely uncomfortable silence. Everyone in the room, including the fowl, was watching him intently.

"You have to hold your palm out." Niniane whispered, finally.

"Oh, my, yes!" Said the Bishop. "Father Frank told me. He had hoped to come along, but I'm afraid he was called to an emergency at the hospital." The Bishop closed his eyes briefly and prayed a brief prayer for forgiveness for this necessary white lie, the truth being that Frank had called him at the last minute on his cell phone and announced, without explanation, that he would not attend the meeting. As he prayed, he allowed himself a split second fantasy of sending a drunken and repentant Father Frank to an even more remote rural parish for being so unfeeling. He held open his palm. "I understand you would like to become a Catholic, Charlie."

*Yes.*

The Bishop took his hand out from under Charlie's beak and stared at it for a moment. He stood up. He shook his head. "Excuse me," he said, and he went through the kitchen into the garage, then out into the driveway. Once at his car, he leaned against the driver's side door, and stared at his palm again.

*Yes.* The word seemed to repeat itself in the skin of his hand. The cool dull beak had tickled a bit. He saw again the bob and weave of the chicken's tiny head as he wrote the word 'yes' with his beak. It would be comical if it weren't so disturbing. The Bishop looked up at the sky. "Why?" He whispered, his voice suddenly gravelly.

Forty years in ministry had taught him that the answer to this question was never immediately forthcoming. He sighed. They'll think I've beat it! He thought. Not wanting to cause them more concern than was necessary, he hurried back inside, but not before he took one last look down the long gravel driveway in the hope of seeing Father Carl Frank's car approaching.

Later, Niniane stood alone in the open mouth of the garage as the Bishop's car backed out of the driveway. She stood there long after the car had disappeared down the highway.

The others were all inside. The Bishop had asked Niniane to see him to his car after he concluded his meeting with Charlie. She's been surprised when he'd asked her to do that, because she had not said more than five words to him since his arrival. Everyone, even her dreams, seemed to be implore her to allow Charlie's to pursue this foolhardy catholic lunacy without question. It's not, she'd thought, while she watched Charlie's beak scratching the Bishop's palm, that I don't think its important for Charlie. I know it is. But it's also creepy and he's getting us all way out of our league.

At one point, while the Bishop was talking to Charlie, basically repeating to him what he'd told Father Frank, Dillis had put his hand on her shoulder. Subtly, with as little movement as possible, she'd shrugged, and he took his hand away. Not long after that the Bishop looked right at her and said he was afraid he's have to be going, but that he would appreciate it if she would see him to his car. The old man rose then, bent over, placed his right hand upon Charlie's' comb, mumbled for a moment with his eyes closed, then shook hands with Dillis and May and Irene. He followed Niniane out through the garage, and spoke to her as they stood beside his car.

"Do you have a minute or two to talk, Ms. Westvane?" He said.

She shrugged again. "I guess."

The Bishop's long, salt and pepper eyebrows crooked and rose with professional sympathy. "You aren't very happy about me being here."

Niniane shrugged again. "It doesn't have anything to do with me. This is Charlie's thing. He has his own mind--" she winced, internally, hearing herself repeat what everyone was so fond of telling her, as if she didn't know it, "--and I--" here she looked into the Bishop's face-- "I support him, no matter what choice he makes. Even if I don't agree with it."

"You don't agree with Charlie's becoming a Christian?"

"I don't agree with Christianity." She said. That should put an end to that.

"Then why does Charlie?" Said the Bishop.

Niniane was startled. She looked up into the Bishop's face with real amazement. "How should I know?"

"You can't know... unless he's told you. But I suspect its not an easy thing for you to talk about, with anyone. Your convictions."

"You're way off there. Everyone knows what my convictions are. Animals should not be slaughtered and subject to the needs of humans. All life is precious. Humans aren't the only animals that feel. Charlie's proof of that. But I knew all this long before Charlie came along."

"How did you know?"

Niniane set her jaw. The origins of her convictions were none of the old man's business. "I just did."

The Bishop shoved his hands in his pockets and scuffed the gravel on the driveway with the toe of his shoe. "You sound like a young woman with a strong sense that we human beings are subject to a dangerous pride."

"That's for damn sure."

The Bishop smiled. "Some would say that those who acknowledge the limits of human reasoning are on the threshold of faith."

Niniane glared at him. "Maybe," she said. "And maybe some others would say that its obvious from the mess the world is in that humans aren't—and shouldn't be—in charge of everything. That doesn't mean we have to give our hearts to Jesus. It just means we have some sense."

The Bishop lifted his hands from his pockets and crossed them over his chest. "All right, Ms. Westvane. Your point is taken. I'm just trying to understand more... about the nature of Charlie's abilities... and his faith. I want to understand your part in his journey, Ms. Westvane."

Why? This isn't about me."

"It's about someone you love. Someone in whom your convictions are made manifest. None of this would be happening if you didn't truly love Charlie."

Niniane stepped back. She shoved her hands in the back pockets of her cut-offs. It was a very warm morning. She suddenly felt very conscious of how much of her legs were showing.

"What do you want from me?"

The Bishop looked down the driveway for a second. To the right, to the left, and in the distance, there seemed to be nothing inhabited but this farm. Back in the living room, this girl's distress, made palpable in her neglecting to suggest, despite the length of the meeting, that the Bishop hold Charlie rather than she, seemed to dominate the entire atmosphere in the room. She was acting, he realized, like a person holding a massive grief at bay.

"Ms. Westvane, this is more about you than you realize."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you are a major factor in this undertaking. If Charlie is baptized, you need to think about what that is going to mean for your entire family. What I'm saying, Ms. Westvane-"

"Oh, for God's sake, call me by my name."

"For God's sake, then, what I'm saying, Niniane, is that Charlie will make history. And by virtue of that, so will you. Nothing like this has ever happened before in the entire history of Christianity. Now, from talking to Charlie, I can see that he doesn't quite realize what all this means. And also from talking to Charlie, I can see that the one person he really loves, more, maybe than his own soul, is you. And frankly Niniane, I need you to help him to see that he implicates you all in what he is doing."

"Me!"

"You. And your aunts. And your...young man."

Niniane held her hands before her. "But... Charlie isn't doing this for me. He knows all this stuff gives me the creeps.... I mean..."

"I know what you mean. It's all unfamiliar and overwhelming. To you. But, not, it seems," The Bishop mused, "to Charlie. That's the extraordinary thing about it..." He put one pale, long-fingered hand to his cheek and stared off into the forest for a moment. "Niniane, where is Charlie's mother?"

"His mother?" Niniane looked puzzled. "Over in the coop. Why?"

"May we..."

Niniane shrugged and led the Bishop over to the chicken yard. They stood on either side of the coop, gazing inside at the hens.

"The big one in the middle." Said Niniane, pointing. "That's Charlie's."

The Bishop looked for a long time at Charlie's mother. Then he stood, closed his eyes for a moment, and smiled at Niniane.

"I don't suppose she can tell us anything."

Niniane smiled back. "No. I mean, I've never tried teaching her anything. Charlie says... what does he say? Oh... he says he's unique among his species."

"Is that right?" The Bishop said. "Interesting."

"Yeah."

They walked back to the car in a not uncomfortable silence. "Well," said the Bishop. "I thank you. I'll be in touch very soon. Like I told Charlie, I must pray very hard before I do or say anything else."

Whatever, thought Niniane. But she said, with no false sincerity, "Thank you for coming."

He nodded. "I hope you will think about what we talked about. Your future and Charlie's are interlinked. He must come to understand that."

"But what can I do? I don't want to stand in his way. I just want...." she looked away.

"What do you want, Niniane?"

I just want him to be happy, she thought.

"All I want is to make sure he doesn't get eaten."

With that the Bishop nodded, got into his car, and backed out of the driveway, leaving Niniane standing alone at the end of the driveway. She wondered for the first time in her life what it must be like to be a human being- a man, even, with all of the impulses and drives and faults that go along with being such a creature, and believing in something as preposterous, as fairy-tailish, as Christianity; it seemed to her to be such a-- she couldn't help it-- *womanish* set of beliefs. To go so far as to become a priest, to take a vow of celibacy- she shook her head. Everyone knew all priests and nuns were closeted gays. Afraid of themselves, afraid of God, afraid of sex, afraid of going against society...

She remembered Charlie, strapped into the passenger seat of Dillis' car, driving off that day to present himself the priest. He hadn't looked back, not once. He was

obviously excited that morning, even if he was afraid. He was a courageous bird. More courageous than she could ever be.

She stood up and went into the house. The living room was empty. Everyone had gone separate ways. She felt suddenly immeasurably lonely, standing with one sandaled foot resting on top of the other in the middle of the living room. She could see Dillis in the backyard, sitting in the old tire swing she used to swing on that hung from the magnolia tree. Charlie was on the ground beside him, strutting around. Irene and May could be heard upstairs, moving something. Niniane went outside and picked up Charlie. Dillis smiled at her. She looked away.

"You know I'm just worried about you getting hurt, Charlie," she whispered to him.

*I'll be okay.*

They all three shivered as the sun ducked behind a cloud.

## Chapter Twelve/ Fractures

The accident happened the very next morning. Enjoying a rare moment to himself without his beak in a book, Charlie was walking along the perimeter of the wooden railing that encircled the raised back patio when he was frightened by the sudden presence of a large orange, uncivilized looking cat not one foot in front of him. Providentially, Niniane was, at that moment walking into the living room. She saw through the glass door what was happening, screamed and struggled with the heavy sliding glass doorway which tended to stick in its runner, scrambled outside, but by then the damage was done. Charlie had fallen over ten feet to the ground below, and the cat was getting ready to pounce when Niniane, with an ear-splitting shriek, pushed the cat off the porch railing with all her might, then catapulted herself over to where Charlie lay motionless.

"Charlie! Are you all right!" she screamed, but of course, there was no audible answer from Charlie. His beak opened and closed several times, so she knew he was alive, but she did not think to hold out her hand so he could speak. She started to pick him up, but as soon as she did he emitted a strangled squawk and his left wing beat the air.

"Oh my god," Niniane moaned. "Oh my god, Charlie." She stood up and screamed. "DILLIS! MAY! IRENE! GET OUT HERE, QUICK! IT'S CHARLIE!" Her voice broke on the final syllable. She cupped herself like a shell over the wounded bird.

Dillis was in the shower, having slept late, but May came running. "What is it!" She shouted, scrambling down the stairs of the patio, but before Niniane could answer May saw.

"Did he fall?" She said. Niniane, wide eyed, her hands over her mouth again, nodded.

"From up there? Oh no..." May bent down over the fallen chicken and touched his head gently. "Charlie?" She said. The beak opened once again, feebly.

"He can't move!" Niniane bent down beside her aunt. "I tried to pick him up, but it hurt him, he screamed and beat his wings, but he didn't get up- oh *Jesus*, May!"

May ran her hand along the length of Charlie's body. Niniane gasped.

"Don't *hurt* him, May!"

"Niniane, be quiet." Said May. She took a deep breath. Niniane stood up, took a step back, then took a step forward and leaned over Charlie again.

"Is he gonna be okay?"

"I said be *quiet*." May's voice roughened the final word, and Niniane took a step back and stayed back. She looked around for the cat, which had landed, despite Niniane's shove, on its feet, and stalked away into the woods from whence it had come.

With excruciating slowness and delicacy, May lifted the chicken. Again, he beat his left wing, but not as frantically as when Niniane had tried to lift him. May ran her hand lightly over the wing and it stilled. She lifted Charlie to the level of her face and peered at his right side. She ran her hand over him, this time on his right side, and once again Charlie emitted a high pitched, gurgling squawk.

May set him down. "It's his wing. He's broken it."

Niniane moaned.

May stood up. "Niniane, go inside and get that milk crate. And a pillow from the sofa. And find Irene. Hurry!"

"What are you gonna do?! Is he all right?"

"We're taking him to the vet, Niniane. What else can we do?"

#

It took a full forty-five minutes to get to the veterinarian's office, which was located in a small town 7 miles to the north. They took Dillis car, rather than the truck, which could only seat three. The vet, a woman with a cascade of grayish red curls who had for years been friendly with May and Irene, confirmed May's diagnosis without even a second glance at Charlie.

"Broken wing," she said abruptly. "How'd that happen?"

"A \*&%\$#~@ cat was about to get him and he fell off the patio." Said Niniane, tearfully.

The vet raised an eyebrow and looked at Irene. "You had a chicken out on your patio?" She said.

"Long story, Nancy." Said May.

May set the milk crate on the chrome exam table and the vet leaned over him. "He's a nice size. Good color in his comb, and his eyes are bright. Shame he had to get hurt. He might have been top dog in a few months." She said. "Tsk. What do you want me to do?"

"Can't you help him?" Niniane's voice was a helpless squeal.

"Hush, Niniane," said May. "Nancy, our niece has been raising this rooster for herself. He's not livestock. Whatever you need to do, do it. We want to keep him in good shape."

The vet shrugged. She'd seen it a million times, and never could figure out the reason. Every once in awhile, even the most levelheaded farmers got attached to one of their animals and just couldn't let it go like the others. Something, she guessed, just made the animal stick out in a crowd, and when that happens, no matter how bad things got, no matter what, the chosen pet got special treatment. She knew a swine farmer in the next county, a huge, burly, no-nonsense redneck named Pittman who actually had a Christmas stocking for one of his sows whom he called, interestingly, Big Mama.

"Well, he'll never fly again," said the veterinarian. "But I'll do my best." Seeing that her levity had little effect on the gathered assembly, the doctor, in a flat voice directed the human beings into the waiting room so that she could do her job in peace. They all were taking the whole thing too seriously, and it was getting on her nerves. She liked chickens as much as if not more than the next person, but there was such a thing as priorities.

#

The vet told them it would be best for their chicken to stay at the animal hospital overnight, just on the slim chance that he might reinjure his splinted wing back on the

farm, but his owners insisted that they take him home. "He'll sit still," said the young girl. "We keep him in the house, anyway. He's very well trained."

"Whatever you say." Said the doctor, and handed the prescription for painkillers to May. She watched as the little group walked out into the parking lot with the groggy but, the doctor mused, indeed an incredibly cooperative chicken in a yellow milk crate. She turned to her receptionist, who was straightening up the magazines that Dillis had left open and in disorder on the waiting room table and said, "Poor chicken. I bet that girl'll never let him out of her sight again. Did you get a load of that?"

"A load of what?" Said the receptionist.

The veterinarian sighed and ran her fingers through her hair. "I don't know why, but it makes me sad. Its one thing to love your animal, but it's another thing to be so sentimental. If that girl keeps that chicken inside all the time, he'll be dead in a few months. Chickens are not humans. They have their own needs. It's cruel to pretend they're just like cute little Easter presents. That bird needs sunlight and pretty soon he's going to want to mate."

The receptionist grunted. She was a temp, and did not plan on staying at this job after the end of the week. As a member of the Church of God, she did not approve of women in positions of authority other than the sacred office of motherhood, and she would not be working at all had her husband not told her to in order to save up money for the mission trip to Mexico they were planning as soon as their youngest son completed his long distance transport training course, got a job and was out of the house. She also did not approve of those two strange women who lived on the old Blattery place, and she was horrified to see that there were a boy and a girl who were obviously too young to be dating with them and hanging on to each other like a couple of drunks. And crying, at least that girl was, like a baby over a chicken with a broken wing. It just goes to show, she told herself, how silly people can be when they don't have the Lord in their lives.

The receptionist looked pointedly over her desk at the waiting room, which was empty, then at her watch. "I guess we might as well go home," the veterinarian said. "I'll lock up."

The receptionist nodded and silently thanked God for the veterinarian's act of kindness.

#

They group from the farm was so intent, once they got outside the hospital building, on checking in with Charlie to see if he felt okay that not one of them noticed, as they all peered into the milk crate that Niniane was holding, that the receptionist was walking in their direction.

Dillis, having asked Charlie how he was doing, had his hand in the crate, and was waiting to feel the cool, gentle, firm scrape of Charlie's little beak.

"What did he say?!" The receptionist heard the teenage girl demand. "Dillis, did he say anything?"

"Would you pipe down, Niniane?" Said the boy. He withdrew his hand "He must be asleep. He's not saying anything."

"Well, what on earth..." the receptionist cried. She burst out laughing. With one motion, four heads turned in her direction, and the receptionist, who had seen miracles and who herself had experienced that anointing of the Holy Spirit which granted the gift of tongues, realized that she'd never seen four human beings at the exact same moment each turn so deathly pale.

#

"Niniane." Said Dillis firmly, with all the manfulness he could muster. They were back at the farm, sitting on the back porch, and he was trying to look her in the eye. "She's not going to say anything."

"Then why did she just stare at us and run away?"

"Because she thought we were crazy! She doesn't have the slightest clue about Charlie."

Niniane dismissed this optimism with a click of her tongue. "She's still going to say something. I know it. She's going to go home and say to her husband, 'you know, I saw the funniest thing. Those two that have the farm out that way, Well, I always knew they were strange, but today they came to the office and tried to talk to this chicken of

theirs that broke his wing.' And the husbands going to say, Well, that's it their crazy. Go on and call the sheriff."

"Niniane, your being paranoid."

"You're being naïve. You don't know what people are like out here. They don't like anything that's different. They've never liked May and Irene. One time, when I was little... well, when I was thirteen... a couple of the older boys who worked over on the Pittman's farm chased me all the way home from the lake, calling me a little lezzie. I'd been swimming, and I don't know what they were planning on... anyway, when I was little, when my grandparents were alive, the people out here used to be nice to me, but ever since May and Irene bought the place..." Niniane hung her head. She hated this. She wanted to think of the farm as a place out of the world, untouched by time and by the judgments of a rabidly Christian society, her aunts and their fierce insistence on their own self-sufficiency made that illusion a reality—most of the time. But things were changing, and had been, she knew, even before Charlie. She sighed again.

Dillis stood up and walked around. Just inside the sliding glass door, Charlie was sleeping with the aid of the shot the vet had given him, free for the moment of pain and worry. Dillis wished, suddenly for his weed, the last of which he had smoked the night before. He shoved his hands in his pockets and walked back around and knelt in front of Niniane.

"Niniane, please don't worry. It'll be okay."

Niniane still sat slumped in the porch swing, and Dillis took her hand, which remained limp and unresisting, and warm in his own. He suddenly wanted, more than anything, to kiss her, to hold her close to him, silent and sad, in that swing, and to have her cling to him. He doubted that would happen. But her eyes were open, and looking, with something, like need, into his.

"I wish I thought so," she said. "I'm scared to death. Aren't you?"

Dillis sighed. "Yeah. I am."

"Even if she doesn't say anything..." Niniane squeezed her eyes shut. "And I know she will. I know it."

Dillis tightened his grip on her hand. Still she didn't resist. He took off his glasses with his other hand and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I know. It doesn't matter. He's not safe with us anymore. I mean, we can't keep him safe."

"What's going to happen to him?" Niniane leaned forward and rested her soft, warm cheek against Dillis' neck.

"He's going to get baptized."

"Then what?"

"I don't know. "

Niniane said nothing, and Dillis' hand moved from her shoulder to her waist. He drew her body in towards his own and held his breath, waiting for her to pull away. But she didn't. They reclined upon one another like this for a while, and Dillis was reminded of those first few weekend nights that they spent together in the backseat of his car. This was a Niniane he'd sometimes thought, especially since he'd made his decision not to return to high school, that he'd never see again. He took a deep breath, taking in with it the scent of her hair and her skin. This, he thought, is better than weed. Why can't she always be this chill? He lifted her long hair to kiss her.

Niniane stiffened and pulled away. "Dillis?" she said abruptly, as if she was finding herself suddenly awakened in an unfamiliar place. "Listen. If that secretary runs her mouth, we'll just take him home. To my house. In Raleigh, I mean. We won't tell anyone, not even Irene or May. That way, he'll be safe, and he'll be with me, until we can figure out what to do. Don't you think that's the best thing to do?"

"Sure." Said Dillis. He sighed and hunched over, and looked down through the cracks in the planks of the wooden patio floor at the damp dark ground underneath. Taking Charlie to Niniane's house in Raleigh would be a temporary solution at best, but Dillis was suddenly too tired to argue or even care.

Niniane stood up. She leaned over and kissed Dillis warmly and wetly- on the cheek. "You're the best," she said. "I don't know what we'd do without you." Oblivious to the fact that Dillis was scowling at the ground beneath the patio, she spun around a few times on the balls of her feet, suddenly carefree. "I think I better go inside and turn on the TV and make sure there's nothing on there about Charlie. It's almost time for the six o'clock news." And with that she opened the sticky sliding glass door

with a minor struggle and pranced into the living room, causing Charlie to stir druggedly in his dresser drawer. She bent over him and cooed, "Go back to sleep, Charlie.

Everything's going to be just fine, sweetie."

In his opiated dream, Charlie was lifted by gentle hands to recline upon a bosom as soft and white as a cloud, as the voice of a distant angel sung his praises. He opened and shut his beak, bobbed his head up and down a few strokes, and was still.

Outside, Dillis wondered where one could possibly find some weed out here in the country.

#

The morning after the cat attack Charlie woke up fairly clear of the drowsiness caused by the anesthetic the vet had given him. He felt awkward with a bandage wrapped around his wing, but as he used the wing merely for balance, he only really noticed it when he was walking around-- which wasn't often. He took to spending much of his time indoors now, never asking to be let out onto the patio unless somebody was close by. He had no desire to encounter that cat again. Among all of the residents of the farmhouse it was unanimously agreed upon, if unspoken, that the world was no longer a safe place for a chicken.

Meanwhile the Bishop, having been alerted by Dillis about the cat attack, was at work attempting, as discreetly as he could, to inquire into the possibility of having a chicken baptized. In this, his progress was negligible, such a question never having been approached before. He brought it up to a number of canon lawyers of his acquaintance, under the guise of the proposition being a joke, but none of them responded to his e-mails. The timing couldn't be worse. No one in the Church these days, the bishop reflected, was much in the mood for jokes. And now it was beginning to seem that if the question of Charlie's baptism was to be officially approached, it would have to be sooner rather than later, for Dillis' had called to report the incident with the cat and with the veterinarian's receptionist. This was indeed alarming. The Bishop came to the conclusion that Charlie's permission must be asked for him to alert the Archbishop regarding the chicken's request for baptism.

At his pre-dieu in his Diocesan office, the Bishop indulged himself in a venomous denouncement of Father Frank to their common Maker. Following his meeting with Charlie earlier in the week, the Bishop had gone directly to Father Frank's rectory and found him there prone on his sofa with the television on, not drunk, as the Bishop at first, with a sinking heart assumed, but sleeping. Upon being awakened, Frank had announced, sleepily and with an infuriatingly placid countenance, that God had told him not to have anything more to do with that peculiar chicken, and that furthermore, God was calling him out of the priesthood.

"Have you lost your mind?" The Bishop had exclaimed. "This could be the biggest...for the Love of God, this *will* be the biggest upheaval in the history of the Church since Martin Luther! And *you* were the point of contact, Frank! You can't leave now! You can't just *abandon* this!"

The younger priest, his squat, Levantine figure wrapped in an absurd striped bathrobe, only yawned and leaned back on his sofa. "Sit down, Vinnie," he said. "And try not to get so bent out of shape. Everything's going to be okay."

"Frank," the bishop took a deep breath and sat down, "I know all of this is very overwhelming. I'd like to just let someone else handle it myself, believe me. But you have to see that for you to all of a sudden distance yourself- not only from what's happening, but from your *priesthood*- well, it's not going to make things any easier. For you, or me, or anybody. This is already irregular enough...it's only going to get more so... and now you're telling me you're *leaving*?..." the bishop sputtered and was silent. For a moment he felt like taking the cord of Frank's unbecoming bathrobe and wrapping it around the younger priest's stubbly throat.

Carl Frank patted his Bishop manfully on the knee. "Vinnie," he said. "There is no other way. Believe me. *No other way*. Since the very first time I felt that chicken's beak in my palm, there has been something incredible going on inside of me. At first, I thought it was just the shock... the weirdness of it all, but Vinnie, I've been doing a lot of thinking since then... a lot of praying... and this last night, Vinnie, I had a dream." He looked at the Bishop expectantly.

The bishop rolled his eyes. He couldn't help it.

Carl Frank laughed. “I know how it sounds, Bishop. Believe me. I’ve heard it all before too, you know, all the Freudian and Jungian explanations, I’ve know that it’s all supposed to be ambiguous, that you can’t infer the future from dreams, you can only infer your own feelings. But Vinnie, this was not your normal dream. It wasn’t even your normal *vision*... if there is such a thing as a normal vision. This, Vinnie, was *apocalyptic*. I was standing at the alter saying Mass, and at the moment of consecration, all of a sudden I could feel myself being transformed, into all things, a lily! One minute I was myself, a priest, and the next moment, I was in the middle of a field, and I could feel my roots drinking in moisture from the earth, and I couldn’t see or hear, but I could feel myself bobbing in the breeze and taking in the sunlight and I was surrounded by other flowers, and by God, I was a lily! And I’d never felt so complete in all my life! The moment I woke up, I knew I’d received a message from God. I’m telling you, Vinnie, it wasn’t like anything that has ever happened to me before in my life. It was so *real*, Vinnie; and yet it was so *strange*! It was even stranger, I think, than the fact that that chicken can write and read. It was like God has sent a message specifically for *me*. I don’t know, Vinnie, maybe it is all of the stress, maybe my mind had gone haywire, but to tell you the truth, I don’t think so. Because it seems to me that if I were cracking up, I’d feel like I was on a *mission* or something. But I don’t! It’s just the opposite, in fact. I feel like all I really need to do in this world is to be a gardener. I want to spend my life working with my hands in the dirt, helping something beautiful grow out of it...”

Bishop Vincent O’Connor’s jaw dropped. He stared at the dark yet glowing face of the younger priest on the sofa beside him and searched it for signs of mania, if not full-blown psychosis. But Father Frank’s expression was quite collected, if a bit dreamy—and the Bishop was struck by the realization that for the first time in their acquaintance with one another, the young priest was not talking to him as if he had the answer to everything. For once, Father Frank was relating to him as an equal.

The Bishop leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. There was a definite movement in Father Frank’s soul, but he mustn’t get carried away. One did not abandon a difficult to fill parish assignment merely on account of a dream, no matter how numinous. He opened his eyes, stood up, and put his hand on Father Frank’s terrycloth covered shoulder.

“A gardener,” he said slowly. “That sounds lovely, but Carl... I know you’ve been unhappy at Our Lady of Pity, but now with all of this business about the chicken coming up, surely you must see that all that is bound to *change*. You’re going to be at the forefront of a major controversy! You’ll probably be made a Monsignor before all this is over with! And besides, you can’t expect me to just release you from your duties...”

Carl Frank leaned forward and his bathrobe gaped, revealing an unbecomingly hairy chest and stomach. “Vinnie. I’m not going to leave you in the lurch entirely. Whatever I can do to help you... and to help Charlie’s cause... I’ll do, but one thing you have to be clear about is that I can no longer function as a priest. My job is done, and its time to move on to other things. All my life, it seems like, I’ve been waiting for this... this one thing to come along that I can do for the Church, and now that it’s come, its like a great big release. I was meant for this one thing, Vinnie... but I wasn’t meant to spend my whole life as a priest. I think I’ve known that for a long time, but I just couldn’t admit it. I don’t like being under obedience, Vinnie. It’s not good for me. You and I get along because we basically agree about things, but what if something happens to you? What if you get elected Archbishop...”

“Frank, don’t be absurd.”

“I’m serious! If this whole thing has taught me anything, its that you never know what’s going to happen. You’ve made my time as a priest tolerable, Vinnie. You’ve taken me under your wing, and I’m grateful. But I’ve never been happy. And that’s not fair to me, you, or Our Lady of Pity. I love the Church, but I don’t like it, and I have to have something to like soon, or I’ll stop being able to love. Sometimes you have to turn away from the things you love in order to set them... and yourself... free. Maybe I’m no better for the Church now than the Church is for me. Maybe I’m just burnt out again, but I don’t think so. I think I’m burnt *clean*. Charlie will get what he needs with or without me. I’ve already done my part. I took him seriously. I still do. And now I can take my own self seriously. Do you see what I mean?”

“No,” said the Bishop. “but I’m not going to argue with you. You have my support if you feel that God truly calling you to a less stressful ministry. I just hope you realize that leaving the priesthood will not be the answer to everything. Carl, I wouldn’t be a responsible pastor if I didn’t ask you... when was your last drink?”

Father Frank smiled and rubbed his hands together like a child anticipating dessert. “Since the night after I met Charlie. I haven’t even wanted one since then!”

“Good for you.” Said the Bishop. “Unfortunately, I think I could use one. Carl, why didn’t you at least come out to the farm today? It went well enough, but my God, I could have used some support. The girlfriend is like a little vegan Eva Peron. She’s very protective of that bird.”

Frank shifted in his seat and tightened the cord of his bathrobe. “I couldn’t go, Vinnie. It would have been... irresolute of me to go. I meant to call sooner, but I was up so late after the dream, writing in my journal, and I turned on the TV to keep me awake, but it didn’t work, and I fell into the most wonderful, dreamless sleep. The phone didn’t ring once! I guess it was just meant to be, Vinnie. You know I try to be responsible.”

The Bishop rose and Frank followed him to the door. “I’ll need a letter giving me official documentation of your decision, Carl. Rome wasn’t built in a day.” His hand grasped the doorknob but was still. He looked back at the younger cleric. “You’re not out of the woods yet. There’s a lot to be ironed out before you are free to make this transition.”

“Vinnie, Charlie can speak for himself. As soon as anyone in the church gets a chance to really experience his gift, they aren’t going to doubt it. Whether or not he’ll be baptized is another thing; but you know as well as I do that to feel Charlie writing his little heart out into the palm of your hand is to believe. You aren’t going to need me. I’ll be happy to answer any questions that anyone has, I’ll testify in Rome if and when it comes to that, and you have my word that I won’t say anything to anyone about this without your permission *and* Charlie’s, but I need to concentrate on myself. As much as I would love to help you, I can’t do more than the bare minimum. Charlie has to pursue his own happiness, and I have to pursue mine. I know you understand...”

“Oh, I understand, all right.” The Bishop sighed. “You’ve had an experience you can’t deny. As much as I hate to lose you as a priest, I can see that this is a road you’re going to have to explore. Why now, of all times, I’m sure I can’t fathom, but God moves in mysterious ways, and all that.” The Bishop rubbed his forehead, which was beginning to ache. “Allow me to say, however, Carl, that I think you’re being a bit naïve.

It takes a lot of struggle to manifest a calling. You know that. The peace you felt as a lily in that dream... well, reality wears peace thin, you know that..."

"I know, Vinnie. I'll be patient. In the meantime, whatever I can do..."

"Just give me time to figure out what to do with Our Lady of Pity. *And* to go over your resignation with the deployment office. And in the meantime, for the Love of God, Carl, don't drink... unless you're having one with me."

"You have my solemn word. Listen. If you don't mind, can you tell me what you plan to do now?"

"I'm calling in the Franciscans."

#

Father Angelo Schiaperelli, OFM, stood on the front porch of the farmhouse in his homespun habit and manipulated his Rosary while he waited for someone to answer the door upon which he just knocked. Brother Sun was beating down upon the young Friar's tonsured head with ebullient intensity. Father Angelo considered knocking again, figuring that he had not knocked loud enough, perhaps, the first time, but then the thought occurred to him that there was a good reason that he should be kept waiting. Perhaps he was not yet sufficiently spiritually prepared for this unusual encounter. He turned on the front stoop and regarded the Ford Fiesta he'd driven. A prayer for patience, he told himself, and then I'll ring the doorbell. One way or another, someone will notice.

He crossed himself and mentally recited the Angelus with a concentration of attention that rendered him momentarily oblivious to the heat. This done, he closed his eyes and recalled the events of the morning with a similar intensity. The Bishop had called the diocesan retreat center/Franciscan Abbey where Father Angelo was acting as Prior.

"Angie," the Bishop had said. "I have a favor to ask you. And it's a doozy."

"Ask away." Angelo had said. "Just don't call me Angie."

"Angelo, seriously. I have a big problem out in Robeson County. It involves an intelligent chicken. I thought of you boys instantly."

Father Angelo had been all ears after that. He was a young Friar, but an accomplished one, with a master's degree in Medieval Literature and a knack for arboriculture. Father Angelo had always suffered from his excess of energy. Surviving on only four hours sleep a night, when he was not absorbed in some problem, he had the tendency to wonder if perhaps he was not quite human. He was a short man with a wiry build and a coarse, curly moustache and goatee, and he had an excess of body hair, which made him highly susceptible to heat rash.

Father Angelo crossed himself, stood, and knocked, this time very loud, with great energy, and praised God for God's manifold, infinite means of communicating.

#

Irene answered the door. "Yeah?" she said.

Father Angelo smiled at the great big woman in the doorway. "Yes. I'm Angelo Shiaperelli, of the Franciscan Order of Friars Minor. Bishop Serxner asked me to stop by here and visit with a chicken named Charlie."

Irene opened the door reluctantly. Even though they had all been made aware by the Bishop that the Franciscans would be involved in Charlie's case, no one, not even Dillis, relished the prospect of the chicken's being carted off to a monastery for safekeeping. None of them could bring themselves to tell Charlie, either. It was decided that the Abbot would come to the farm, introduce himself to Charlie, and break the news. Niniane retreated to her room as soon as she heard the sound of an unfamiliar car crunching up the driveway.

Irene led Father Angelo into the living room, where Charlie was sitting on a pillow by the sliding glass door reading a Norton Anthology of English Literature, having decided to take a break from theology for a while. He raised his head and looked at the monk, and stood up, which in this situation, on account of his lack of lips, was his equivalent of smiling.

Father Angelo had been told by the Bishop that the chicken communicated by writing in one's palm with his beak. "It's easier," the Bishop had said, "if you just put him on your lap."

Father Angelo didn't feel comfortable assuming so intimate a contact right away. He sat down, lotus style, in front of Charlie. "Hello," he said, rather loud, as if he were talking to a hard of hearing great-grandmother who did not understand English very well. "My name's Angelo Schiaperelli. I'm a priest of the Franciscan Order of Friars Minor, and Bishop Serxner and Father Frank asked me to drop by and see you. St. Francis, the founder of our order, as you may or may not know, is said to have had a very strong rapport with non-human creatures. Do you know what the word 'rapport' means? It happens to be a shade more French than English." He held out his hand, and sure enough, the chicken began to form letters in it with his beak.

*No. What does it mean?*

The monk was still for a moment as he struggled with a feeling of incredulity he had not foreseen. For as long as he could remember, Father Angelo had enjoyed a sense of himself as being uncommonly attuned to the emotions of animals, and even of plants, hence his hobby of tree cultivation. He had grown up, the youngest son of a large Sicilian family in the Bronx, with one of his immigrant great-grandmothers in the home; and it was this old lady that had sowed in young Angelo the seeds of his vocation. She had been remarkable for her own fervent devotion to the humble, benevolent, animal-loving saint Francis of Assisi, and it was noted by family and neighbors alike that, from the day the old woman moved in with the family until the day of her burial, not one cockroach was ever to be seen in any of the apartments of the large tenement building in which they lived. After her death, however, the bugs that took advantage of her absence were plentiful and large, and even gentle Angelo was obliged to kill them, though never without remorse and the resolve to try to apply the example of the Poverello in such a way that he and creatures like the cockroaches could share the planet in peace. It was not until he was a postulant, working in a Baltimore soup kitchen, that he realized that his great-grandmothers' secret, at least in part, had a lot to do with keeping things clean and not wasting food by throwing it away. Still, Father Angelo sensed throughout his life that there was more to the relationships between the manifold species inhabiting the earth than meets the eye, and for this reason he joined the Franciscan order, and for this reason he felt adequate to the task of watching over Charlie while the chicken appealed to the hierarchy for reception into the Body of Christ. The Bishop's call had surprised Father

Angelo, but he could imagine stranger things. Did not the Scriptures say that all things would in time proclaim the Glory of God? He smiled at the creature before him.

"*Rapport* means, if I can remember correctly, Relationship, especially one of trust or emotional affinity. It derives from the root word in Latin 'porter' to carry, with the prefix 're' indicating a sense of reciprocity, or returning. Our founder had a gift for approaching the dissimilar with a sense of similarity. He was a poet, by inclination."

*I like poetry*, scratched Charlie. *Are you a poet too?*

"I am a priest." Said the monk, noncommittally. "May I ask what you're reading?"

*Swinburne*. Scratched Charlie. *It's great*.

"Love, the first and last of all things made/ the light that has the living world for shade/" Father Angelo quoted. "I am blessed with a nearly photographic memory. I only rarely forget the things I read."

Charlie was still for a moment. *Niniane said a monk would be coming to see me. She didn't say why. What's happening? Is it because I broke my wing?*

The friar looked at Charlie's bandaged wing. "How does it feel?"

*Okay*.

"Well, your wing, among other things, *is* one reason I've been asked to come see you. I know you must be curious, so I'll get right to the point. I am the acting Abbot of a small community of friars who run a retreat center on the outer banks, and the Bishop has asked me to offer you, for as much time as it takes to discern whether or not the Church can baptize a chicken with any validity, a room in our isolated monastery." The monk paused for breath. He was so accustomed to silence in his daily life that when he did talk, he found that his sentences were long and slow and convoluted, like drowsy bodies stretching and twisting themselves awake. "You would be perfectly free there to come and go as you please, and room and board are, under the circumstances, free, with no obligation on your part to participate in the life of the community. The Bishop has asked us, basically, to provide you with sanctuary."

Charlie blinked. *Why?*

"The Bishop is concerned about your safety. You've been hurt."

*It was an accident!*

"There would be less chance of such accidents on the island. Our cat is extremely elderly. You could outrun him easily, even with a broken wing."

*I don't want to leave the farm!.*

"I'm afraid you will have to. Your friends are also leaving."

Charlie was speechless for a full minute. He looked around the living room wildly. He could hear May in the kitchen, murmuring on the phone to somebody.

*Niniane and Dillis are leaving the farm?*

"I'm afraid so."

*WHY!?*

Father Angelo paused. It came to him with a jolt that he was proposing- no... he was *initiating* an upheaval in this creature's life that could not be anything but painful. He was come to take this chicken away from the only home, and the only friends he had ever known to a place so remote and inaccessible that it was only fit for such spirits as sought the austerity and solitude of the monastic life. Charlie, who only wanted baptism, had never expressed any interest in such a life. Clearly, Father Angelo thought, this chicken enjoys society. Clearly, he loves this farm and his human friends alongside it. This, the monk said to himself, is going to be traumatic. He inched forward, retaining his lotus position, to reassure Charlie through reducing the distance between them. "May I call you Charlie?" He asked.

*Yes.*

"Thank you. Charlie, I know that this must be very difficult for you. But the situation has evolved in such a way that the Bishop fears, not without reason, that your cause would be hurt by any premature publicity concerning your... unique abilities. If word got out before the church provided you with some degree of protection from the onslaughts of the media and the potential violence of curiosity seekers, the consequences for you... and your friends... could be more than unhappy. It isn't just for your own sake, though that is important, that there be no trace of any... unusual activity on this farm. We must keep everyone's identity a secret until the church has had time to decide how to proceed. That won't be possible with you all here on the farm together, Charlie. We can't be sure that the locals haven't already got wind of you through the receptionist at the veterinarian's office."

*What?*

“The receptionist saw your friends attempting to get you to communicate with them after you left the animal hospital.”

*Really?*

“Yes. So you see... we have reason to think that it may no longer be safe for you out in the general public. The Bishop thinks, and I and your friends agree, that probably the best place for you to be right now is at our monastery. The grounds are secured from trespassers, and the monks are all sworn to vows of obedience to me. There should be no danger of word getting out about you there.”

Charlie looked up at the monk's hairy face, his tiny, rapidly blinking brown eyes. Where was Niniane? He realized that she had been uncharacteristically quiet all day. There had been a somber air about the whole place, now that he thought about it, ever since May brought in the mail that morning. As a matter of fact, he told himself, things around the farm had not been the same since he fell off the porch the other day. Suddenly Charlie felt again that terrible suspicion that he had transgressed in some hidden yet heinous way. Had he provoked the cat somehow? Whether he had or not, clearly he had done something to put life on the farm in jeopardy. His feathers ruffled with agitation.

*Are Niniane and Dillis and May and Irene coming with us?*

Father Angelo shook his head.

*Why?*

“Charlie, you are the one who has requested baptism. I don't think your friends—particularly the women, would be comfortable in a monastery. And you know they have their own lives to lead. Niniane and Dillis must return to school soon.”

*But what about May and Irene? This is their farm!*

“And it will continue to be. But May and Irene have acknowledged the wisdom of splitting up... at least for the time being... your little company. I know it's going to be a trial for you Charlie, but please know that we will take good care of you. It really is the best thing...”

*I don't care about that! What am I going to do without my friends?.*

“I hope that you will make new friends at the monastery.”

*I don't want new friends. Why is this happening?*

The monk's voice became firm. "Remember your Swinburne, Charlie."

Charlie was so upset he had to stifle a squawk. *What the hell is that supposed to mean!* He scraped into the abbot's palm. That, Charlie marveled, is something Niniane would say!

"Love has its shadow, Charlie," said the friar with great portent. "You need to come with me to the monastery."

#

Charlie left the farm that afternoon. There was no time to waste. A rumor had spread, via the receptionist at the veterinarian's office that the inhabitants of the farm, who were already viewed, on account of their spinsterhood, their lack of family resemblance, and their harboring of a teenage boy and girl who likewise did not look decently related, as peculiar, were pursuing a deviant relationship with a young chicken who had been injured in the process. The morning before Father Angelo's arrival, May had walked out to get the morning paper mailbox to find a beheaded cockerel who happened to be one of Charlie's brothers stuffed into the mailbox. She and Irene were used to some harassment from the surrounding community during and immediately after one of the music festivals, but never before had anyone killed one of their animals. Better to nip it in the bud before the police came around spying. May knew what had to be done. She sat Niniane down in her room, and sternly convinced her, after a brief tantrum, that it was time to get the Bishop to find Charlie a safer place to be.

"I've already looked into a place for him," the Bishop said. "A sanctuary. But what about the rest of you?"

"The rest of us can take care of ourselves. Just don't let anything happen to Charlie."

"We won't," said the Bishop. "If nothing else, the Catholic Church knows how to keep things well concealed."

#

After their talk, Father Angelo took Charlie in his arms and walked him up to Niniane's room where Niniane was packing. He introduced himself and handed Charlie to her.

*I'm leaving.* Scratched Charlie into her palm. *I have to. With me around here, the rest of you aren't safe.*

Niniane bent her neck and whispered into Charlie's feathers. "Charlie, that's not true! It's not your fault. It's that goddamn vet's goddamn bigmouthed secretary." Lifting her face from Charlie's soft, seedy smelling feathers, she spoke, in a muffled, phlegmy voice to the monk. "Sorry, Reverend. But I mean it. I want God- or whoever's in charge, to make sure that hag roasts."

Charlie spoke, or rather wrote, for Father Angelo, who maintained silence. *He doesn't mind.* Charlie said. *He's a liberal.*

Niniane sighed damply and set Charlie on her bed. "Me and Dillis are leaving, too." She said, and indicated with a swing of her arm around the room the disarray that was meant to signify that fact that she'd been busy packing. "May says there might be trouble here, so we have to make ourselves scarce."

Charlie clicked his beak and Niniane came to set down beside him.

*Where are you going?*

Niniane sighed. "Back home. To my mom and dad, Charlie. You know I don't live here all the time."

*I know, but I keep forgetting.* They were silent awhile. Charlie hopped into Niniane's lap. *I wish I could meet your mom and dad.*

"Maybe you will one day." But Niniane had a feeling he wouldn't. She still didn't know what she was going to tell them about coming home early. They would find out everything, eventually, but as far as she was concerned, the later, the better. Niniane did not relish the prospect of assuaging her parents' inevitable astonishment and subsequent worry.

*Have you told them about me?*

"I haven't had a chance to, Charlie." Niniane remembered the monk. "Could we have a minute alone?" She said to Father Angelo, who stood in the doorway to her bedroom and gazed at them, it seemed to Niniane, as if they were a nativity scene.

The friar nodded and walked out into the hallway, closing Niniane's bedroom door behind him. Charlie trembled with excitement.

Niniane bent and pressed her lips to Charlie's now resplendently blood red comb. "I think that you are the best thing that ever happened to me, Charlie. I don't know how I'm going to stand not seeing you every day. I feel like I've known you my whole life."

Charlie had his beak in her palm, but he could not think of anything to scratch into it. He let it rest there. He waited for her to say more.

It was a while before she could continue. "I want you to take care of yourself, Charlie. Make sure they keep you safe. Don't do anything or talk to anybody you don't want to."

*Won't you come see me?*

"I don't know. I don't know if that's a good idea, Charlie- at least not right away. It might be dangerous. I'll come if it's safe. When it's safe. These things always do blow over. It just takes a while."

Charlie could not cry, being a chicken, but his insides felt loose and uncomfortable. *I can't believe this is happening. It's like a nightmare.*

"I know," said Niniane. She was far past the point of crying. She held the chicken in her lap and stared, moist eyed and unseeing, out the bedroom window. "The world, Charlie, is cruel. This is..." She stopped. She had been going to say, 'this is only the beginning.'

*I don't want things to change.*

Niniane sighed, a very deep sigh. She wished, suddenly, that she were a little girl again, with no chicken to love, a little girl who ate hamburgers without a pang. She wished, with the selfishness that comes of weariness, that she had no human feelings of tenderness and love. "I don't either," she said.

Charlie's comb became very warm. Immediately after saying that he didn't want things to change, he remembered, as if by magic, his insight of just a few nights before,

following his initial meeting with Father Frank. Change, it occurred to him for a split-second, is merely a mask for the unchanging. *I'll write.* He wrote. *Will you?*

"Yes," she said. "But Charlie, not right away. We have to be careful."

*After awhile.*

"Yes." She said, without the hope that Charlie felt abundantly in his passion for her. "After it all blows over." She stood up, shook herself, reached down for Charlie.

"You've got to say good-bye to everyone. And then you better get going."

### Chapter Thirteen/ The Cloister

Before Charlie left they all joined hands and wings, at the friar's suggestion, and projected themselves together in a less worrisome future. Dillis removed his glasses afterward and wept openly. "Maybe," he said, not without seriousness, "I'll come be a friar."

His statement went without comment from anybody.

Father Angelo took all their telephone numbers and promised that the Bishop would be in touch. And then, once again, Charlie found himself the passenger in a fast car moving east on a North Carolina Highway.

He said to Father Angelo, who had his hand in the milk crate, *What will I do at the monastery?*

Father Angelo said, "What do you like to do?"

*Read.*

"I hope you like to read theology and devotional literature. That's pretty much all we have. Although there are a few good novels."

*I've never read a novel.*

"I'll find you one to read. I think you'll enjoy the experience of reading a novel. They are very much like poems and theology, and like the bible, they contain an element of story."

*That sounds good.*

"I told you that you needed to come to the monastery."

*I wish I didn't have to come alone.*

Father Angelo said nothing but kept on driving.

By the time they arrived at the monastery, Charlie was fast asleep. Night had fallen over the course of the drive east, and when Father Angelo woke Charlie up he was startled by the unfamiliarity of just about everything around him. Even the air he breathed had a pervasive, unfamiliar, briny odor. He was carried from the car into a building and through a succession of large dark hallways; upon the walls of which hung large studio photographs and oil paintings of men in ecclesiastical garb and solemn, pained faces. Eventually Father Angelo opened a heavy wooden door to a small bare room in which there was a dresser, a rocking chair by a window, and a small, plain twin bed over which was nailed a carved wooden crucifix.

"This is it." Father Angelo said, peering at Charlie from the doorway. "Your room- we call them cells- for as long as you stay with us."

From the bed Charlie turned his head and goggled at the entire space. Soon Father Angelo would turn and step back through that heavy wooden door and close it. He wondered how the monk would respond if he asked him to stay. He clicked his beak.

Father Angelo stepped over to the bed and held out his palm. "What do you need, Charlie?" He said, levelly.

Charlie couldn't think of a thing to say. Even if the monk stayed in the room with him, in the bed, even, he would soon be asleep, and Charlie would be alone anyway. What he needed he would never have, from this monk or anyone, he realized. All of a sudden Charlie remembered one afternoon, not long before, when he and Dillis were standing in the front yard waiting for Niniane and Irene to come home from the library. Dillis had stood somewhat in front of Charlie, occupying himself with a three prong electrical adaptor that he had seen lying on the driveway. It had likely been dropped there by Irene, who often carried such things around the farm in her toolbox for the purpose of adapting her more modern electrical tools to the less advanced wiring and plating of the farm's antique electrical system. Dillis had shown the curious little plastic plug to Charlie and explained its use, and Charlie remembered thinking that the little plug looked like a vaguely human and definitely terrified face with its mouth frozen forever into a silent scream. Dillis had then proceeded to toss the little plug up into the air, catching it in various ways; first in one hand, next in the other, then with one hand cupped behind his back; until eventually the truck bearing Niniane and Irene grumbled up

the long gravel driveway into sight, and Dillis, tossing the plug in the air one last time, threw it too high, reached for it, missed, and then, as if the plug was of no importance whatsoever, ambled over to greet the returning females. Left behind, Charlie had sat on the lawn contemplating the adaptor, which he'd imagined, given Dillis' explanation of its purpose, was a very important thing. When he'd asked Dillis about it later that evening, Dillis had laughed, explaining to him that electrical adaptors were relatively plentiful and cheap, thus justifying his abandonment of it to the ground. Charlie recalled that he'd felt inexplicably sorry for the adaptor, marveling at how an object of such potential importance could be rendered insignificant through the mass production of other objects like it.

Perched on the side of his new bed in his new cell at the monastery, Charlie felt like that unlucky electrical adapter, lost somewhere in the front yard of the farm, where it could serve no useful purpose for which it had been designed, left to the exposure of all kinds of weather until eventually, if it was not found and carried off by some nocturnal animal, it sank slowly into the soft moist topsoil of the front lawn and lay buried there to the end of time, inanimate and dumb. Suddenly bereft of his friends and his home, Charlie felt like something thrown that had not been caught. The distance between himself and all that he had previously known and loved felt like the end of the world. He did not want to remain another minute at this dark and dreary monastery. This remote and plain and polite and utterly masculine sanctuary would never be his home, as the farm had been, despite all its dangers and disappointments and potential for chaos. Charlie was seized with a longing as keen and harsh as the crow of a full-grown rooster, for what his foolish desire for baptism had led him irrevocably away from. He stuck his head beneath the pillow on his bed.

"You're homesick." Said Father Angelo.

Charlie made himself very still. The word eddied and flowed through his mind like a leaf on a stream. Homesick. The word described his feeling perfectly.

Charlie lifted his head from beneath the pillow.

Father Angelo stood up. "We will have to keep your door closed at night. For your protection, and because that's the way we live here, with plenty of solitude. You

may feel trapped, but try to remember that God is with you and that I will look in on you first thing in the morning.”

Charlie nodded.

"It's going to be a long night." The Friar said. "I will leave your light on and bring you a book to read. Not a novel, I think, not tonight. I will bring you something that speaks to your condition of homesickness, something that will console you, in the most ancient, latinated sense of that word."

The monk left, then returned with a large print copy of The Diary of Anne Frank; the heavy pages of which he correctly assumed that the bird could turn without much difficulty with his beak. Charlie read it gratefully and with improvement until he fell asleep.

#

Back at home with her parents, Niniane found herself to be homesick, too. She could think of nothing but Charlie. At the request of the Bishop, she'd addressed a statement to the Papal Nuncio to the effect that she indeed had raised a chicken which had learned to read, and that she had placed the chicken into the care of the Franciscan Community at St. Alvin's Island, North Carolina. But, for the most part, she spent her days in her room, leafing listlessly through teen magazines, chewing on her hair, staring out the window, and struggling with herself over the question of whether or not she should give in to the temptation to call her beloved mentor Mercedes and tell that sensible, passionate, more seasoned Vegan everything.

Her parents, having been briefed by May, received Niniane with equal degrees of disbelief and concern.

"Niniane, what in the world is all this chicken business about?" her mother said.

"I don't know what else I can tell you, Mama!" said Niniane. It was hardly twenty minutes after she woke up her first morning back at home, and her mother had just announced, to Niniane's irritation, that she was taking the day off work. "You *know* what happened. I started raising one of May's chickens, and somehow he learned how to read."

"Niniane, now really. It can't be as simple as that. I looked it up. Chickens are not intelligent animals. You couldn't have possibly taught one to read. I'm surprised that May and Irene could have been taken in like this, but you've obviously been convincing. But this is your mother, Niniane. I'm not angry, but I do think you need to tell me just what you and Dillis have been up to this summer!"

"Mom, I don't want to talk about it with you. You're going to think what you want to think anyway."

"I don't know what you mean by that, young lady..."

Niniane rolled her eyes and went up to her room. Her mother followed her. "Niniane, don't huff away from me like that! I don't know what's gotten into May and Irene, allowing that boy to stay at the farm for almost three whole weeks, but ..."

"Dillis stayed on the couch, Mom, and you know it!"

"Don't interrupt me, Niniane. That's not the point. The point is that your father and I have a right and a responsibility to know what's going on with you. I'm so upset with May and Irene I don't know what to do! And now we've got Catholic *bishops* calling this house? What's next, the *Pope* for Pete's sake...?"

Niniane stopped on the stairway and turned and leaned over her mother, who backed down one step. "You always think I'm just trying to pull some stunt! My God, mother! Who do you think I am?"

"Niniane! I know perfectly well who you are! You're the most headstrong young lady God ever blew breath into, and when it comes to getting your point across, there's nothing you wouldn't do and you know it! You can't blame me for being upset about this... this lunacy!"

"You're not just *upset*, Mother. You're *accusing* me of being a troublemaker. You're worse than May and Irene. You really don't trust me!" Niniane went into her room and slammed the door, and waited.

Her mother threw the door open and glared at her. "Niniane, you're acting like a nine year old. What do you expect from me? A chicken that reads and writes! Who wants to be baptized? And a Catholic baptism? It doesn't make any sense to me."

"Why not?" Said Niniane, sitting on her bed. "You're the one who's religious, not me. I would have thought you'd be happy."

"This has nothing to do with being happy. It has to do with making sense. Where did this Catholic business come from Niniane? We've always been mainline Protestant, on both sides of the family."

"*You* have," said Niniane. "Not me. *I* don't know where this Catholic shit came from. Ask Charlie." She turned and looked at her pillow, away from where her mother stood, arms crossed against her chest, in the doorway. Thelma Westvane was a small, plump woman whose life force seemed to be concentrated within the bright green irises of her small, rather slanted eyes, which peered and darted and rolled behind her glasses as if they were perpetually searching for something. True to her vocation as a librarian, she regarded her daughter's scowling face as if it were a particularly puzzling reference question.

"Don't say 'catholic shit,' Niniane. That's unnecessary." Thelma Westvane lifted her glasses, rubbed the bridge of her nose, and let her glasses fall on their decorative chain to rest on the bosom of her housedress. Perched on the side of her bed, Niniane took a few strands of her long brown hair and took the ends of them between her teeth. This was a childhood habit that indicated real consternation. Thelma Westvane sat down on the bed beside her daughter, looked at her face, then at the wall behind her, then at her daughter's neglected, uneven fingernails. "Honey, are you honestly telling me this isn't some revolutionary thing you and Dillis cooked up?"

"Mom!"

"Niniane, he is strange."

It took Niniane a moment before she realized her mother was referring to Dillis and not Charlie.

"Dillis isn't even vegan. Can't you keep anything straight about my life?" She sighed. "And he wouldn't lie about something as big as this anyway, Mom. And neither would I. You ought to *know* that. And anyway, do you really think we could fool May and Irene?"

"Niniane, I just don't know what to think..."

There was a long silence, until Niniane heaved a sigh. "What does Daddy say?"

Thelma sighed. Horace Westvane thought the whole thing hilarious, not having for the slightest moment considered that the chicken had really learned to read. Having

grown up on a farm himself, in South Carolina, it required no reference book to remind him that chickens were notoriously brainless creatures.

"Oh, you know how he is. He can't take anything seriously."

Niniane hazarded a smile. "And you think *Dillis* is an airhead."

Thelma smiled and shrugged. Niniane looked up at her, and said in a voice just above a whisper.

"I think he got to like Dillis better than me."

Thelma turned. "Your father? Niniane, what are you talking about?"

Niniane stared down into her lap at her hands, their knuckles white and their fingers interlocking. "Not Daddy. Charlie. I think he likes Dillis better than me now."

Thelma stared at her daughter. Niniane's position, face down, long brown hair hanging like a veil on either side, hands gripped together one moment tight, the next moment loosely, was a familiar one. Niniane had been adopted at a relatively late age— one and a half— and had always seemed to need a lot of reassurance. Thelma Westvane forgot, for the moment, about Charlie's impossibility.

"Honey, you know how boys are when they get around each other. They don't know how to show their true feelings."

#

Dillis returned to his part time job at the deli, and found that he could slice, prepare, and even eat chicken meat without any qualms. It seemed to him, actually, that he ate more chicken than he ever had before, for the most part because he did not eat it without thinking of Charlie, and wondering how he was doing way the hell out at that monastery.

#

After the Bishop made a few calls, it did not take long for word to reach the Vatican that a chicken in the United States of America was attempting to be baptized into the faith of the Roman Catholic Church. He felt it prudent to get the process underway as

soon as once reports began to circulate in the Robeson County suggesting the presence of a chicken worshipping satanic cult. In the interests of preparing the faithful for an imminent inquiry into Magisterial teaching in regard to the spiritual state of non-human creatures as well as in the interest of taking the heat off May and Irene, the Bishop intentionally made a statement to the secular press that the Roman Catholic Diocese of Eastern North Carolina had a remarkable and religiously inclined chicken under observation in a facility located somewhere within the state. The media storm that followed was colossal, eclipsing, for a time, all other current events in its degree of frenzy and speculation. The entire world, it seemed, was intrigued by the possibility of a talking chicken. Tabloid headlines in the languages of every developed country proclaimed the chicken variously as a hoax, an angel, the Antichrist, the Second Coming of Christ, an alien from a solar system in the crab nebula populated entirely by a race of intelligent chickens, and the product of a sexual liaison between an unscrupulous biogeneticist and his favorite laboratory specimen. The news media converged upon the diocesan offices of the Eastern North Carolina Bishopric like a plague of locusts, and crews were stationed outside of Catholic churches all over the nation to enlist the commentary of 'the average Catholic' regarding Charlie's request. (Most polls indicated that 78 percent of Roman Catholics felt that Charlie should be baptized, while 16 percent disagreed. Among Protestants, the split was somewhat even, with 62 percent in favor of animal baptism.) There were skits on Saturday Night Live, countless newspaper and magazine columns, websites, chat rooms, and even an academic conference at Harvard Divinity School, all devoted to what was soon known as 'the Chicken Question.' All sorts of speculation arose concerning Charlie's whereabouts and even his very reality. For the first time since Vatican II, a moratorium was put on access to broadcast or print news at the monastery. Father Angelo Schiaparelli felt that Charlie might be made inordinately anxious by reports from the outside regarding Vatican speculation about whether or not he could possibly have a soul.

#

A meeting was held, wherein Father Angelo stated to his community that any contact with the secular press whatsoever would be considered a breach of obedience. "And," he said. "Without converging on him en masse, I want all of us to spend some private time with Charlie. So that we will all have some personal sense of what is at stake. I think every morning he should have a visitor or two. He also needs to be taken for supervised walks on the beach. He spends far too much time alone in his cell, reading."

"Will he participate in the daily office?" One of the newer postulants, Brother Silas, a tall, good-looking, rather cynical monk asked.

"I have left that up to Charlie."

Brother Silas looked out the window of the chapel.

"Brother Silas." Said Father Angelo. "You seem disturbed."

Brother Silas looked at Father Angelo. He was aware of all the other monks looking surreptitiously at him, though they were obliged by the rule to attend only to themselves and the abbot during such organizational meetings. "I'm sorry, Father, if I appear to be distracted."

"Silas, would you mind visiting Charlie this morning?" Said Father Angelo.

Brother Silas' eyes widened. "Me?" He said.

"Unless you would rather not. But I think it would be helpful for Charlie to talk with you. You're our youngest novice, and the most recent addition to our community- Surely you can relate to how he must feel, a young person in a new situation, far away from the people he loves..."

Brother Silas swallowed.

"...and far away from the only way of life he's ever known." Father Angelo smiled at Brother Silas, who once again turned his face to the chapel window. Brother Silas, the abbot had noticed, was deeply unsettled. He was a young man of exceeding intellectual virtues, a historo-critical biblical scholar with the perspicacity of a young Loisy, and no mean homilist. But his spiritual development was retarded by a lifetime of inordinate concern over his striking looks. He was a tall, athletic, dark haired, blue-eyed, hollow cheeked fellow whose handsomeness was accentuated rather than muted by the plainness of the monastic wardrobe. Even in the cloister, he seemed doomed to

conspicuousness and was the object of numerous romantic fancies. Father Angelo, when he returned to his office, thanked God for Brother Silas and for the inspiration that had come to him to bring together Silas and Charlie in their distinct yet related lonelinesses.

#

Halfway across the world, in the Vatican, Charlie Chicken was becoming a red-hot topic of ecclesial debate. Bishop Serxner of Eastern North Carolina had been summoned to report on the events surrounding Charlie's emergence to a committee formed in response to Charlie's request for Baptism.

"First of all," said Msgr. Benito Corinni, an Italian prelate who served as a professor of Canon Law, "have we verified the existence of this so called speaking chicken?"

"Without question," said Bishop Serxner, in Latin, "the chicken exists. I have seen him and spoken with him."

The group, made up of theologians, canon lawyers, clergy engaged in the study of animal behavior, and one secular veterinarian, met in an opulent, if windowless, conference room near St. Peter's Basilica. Sixteen in number, they were from as 10 different countries, and so, during the course of their many meetings, all spoke in Latin, the one tongue they had in common. Bishop Serxner, who's Latin was weak from disuse, could not wait until it was all over.

"This is very serious matter," said Archbishop Carlos Etchegaray, a Basque. "But there is no need to be overly scrupulous. If the chicken is baptized, what harm is done?"

"What if this so called talking chicken proves to be a hoax?" Said Msgr. Corinni. "Think what harm is done! We must be circumspect. This is as delicate a situation as any Marian apparition. We cannot jump to conclusions."

"With all due respect, we cannot delay in making a decision." Said Dr. Jacques Gallant, the Algerian veterinarian. "Our Blessed Mother may appear as often and as for as long as she pleases, or so it seems, but the lifespan of a chicken..." he looked at Bishop Serxner. "...is not terribly long."

Bishop Serxner closed his eyes. He turned to face the veterinarian. "Dear Lord." He said under his breath in English. Then, in Latin. "I had not realized that, Dr. Gallant. How long do we have?"

Dr. Gallant shrugged. "It's hard to say with American poultry. Some specimens have been known to live to up to twenty years. In my country, a few years is long. But it has required already many more than twenty years for the Commission to pronounce upon the authenticity of the Medjugorie apparitions of Our Blessed Mother."

Bishop Serxner breathed a deep sigh. He leaned forward in his chair and looked at all of the gathered men in turn. "We don't have forever. Let's pray for a revelation, and the wisdom to discern what must be done." He bowed his head, but the room was silent. Father Yumi, a Japanese theologian, reached across the table to him. "You will lead us in prayer, yes?" he said.

Bishop Serxner stifled a curse, and murmured to himself in English. "When I think of that adorable little chicken, leaving this world without the Baptism he's asking for, I just want to blow this whole place to Kingdom Come." But in Latin he said, "Lord, give us strength, give us wisdom, but above all grant us, in the words of your Beloved John XXIII, charity in all things doubtful."

#

In the meantime, Charlie was getting used to life at the monastery. As at the farm, he quickly became acclimated to the daily round, and came to attribute his growing sense of peace of mind to the order and regularity of the passing days. And he enjoyed, more than he ever would have imagined, the plentiful solitude. He read voraciously, but at a more leisurely pace than before, often pausing to ponder a certain passage or phrase in whatever he happened to be reading at the time. As Father Angelo had indicated, most reading matter at the monastery had to do with theology, but there was a collection of novels, mostly old, sturdily bound editions that easily remained open in front of him as he read sitting on his bed. One called Look Homeward, Angel he found particularly stirring, and he spent much of his first week in the monastery absorbed in it to the point

that he lost a noticeable amount of weight. One of the effects of this experience upon him was that he began to consider the possibility of writing his own story one day.

He also spent a lot of time contemplating his potential baptism. The monastery library had a collection of books under the subject heading of Sacramental Theology, which Father Angelo made available to Charlie by stacking them at the foot of his bed. From these ponderous, austere volumes he learned that Baptism had its origin in a late antique Jewish lustration rite, and that Baptism in the name of The Father, The Son, and the Holy Ghost was the most ancient and most distinctive token of Christian identity, preceding the formation of the Church itself as an institution. One slim, readable, rather quaintly lyrical tome entitled Christian Initiation in the Early Church composed by a Patristics scholar by the name of Lloyd Patterson suggested to Charlie that, based on the Gospel account of John the Baptist's baptism of Jesus, Baptism can be said to abrogate hierarchical distinctions.

He mentioned this one morning to Brother Silas. He and that young brother had rapidly become mutual confidants. From the first morning, Brother Silas found that he felt a certain kinship with Charlie. He found the chicken easier to talk to than he had ever found anybody, particularly at the monastery. But Brother Silas wasn't sure about the ability of any sacrament to disestablish hierarchy. "Without order, you have chaos," he said, holding out his hand. "Let me see that book."

Taking the book from in front of Charlie, he examined the cover, flipped through the pages, and read the flyleaf. "Well there you go," he said, tossing the book back down on the bed. "This guy's an Episcopalian, not a real Catholic. Episcopalians tend to have a very watered-down theology."

Charlie was disappointed, for he had rather come to love the little book, and it never occurred to him that the author was not a Catholic. He changed the subject to Look Homeward, Angel, which Brother Silas said was a brilliant, if at times rambling study of the narcissistic personality.

Sometimes, though, they talked about themselves to one another without the medium of literature or theology. "What do you think about things here," Silas asked Charlie one afternoon, about a week after Charlie's arrival. He had come to Charlie's room under the pretext of borrowing Charlie's King James Bible for an article he was

researching on English translation of the book of Habakkuk, but in all actuality he wanted to shoot the shit for a while with Charlie. Brother Silas was very aware that Father Angelo was very aware that he was spending much more time with the monastery's visitor than any of the other brothers.

*I like it here. Scratched Charlie. I didn't think I would, but I do. I miss home, of course, but I like having all these things to read.* Before Silas had let himself in, Charlie had been leafing through Volume 5 of the *Notebooks* of Simone Weil, and enjoying in them what little he could understand.

"I guess I like that too," said Silas musingly. "Outside it seems like I never had enough time to really look into things. People were always bugging me."

Charlie waited.

Brother Silas exhaled tiredly out his nostrils. "I don't mean to sound arrogant." He said. "But people really were always bugging me. I attracted a lot of freaks."

Without being noticed, Charlie lifted his beak from Brother Silas palm so that he could look up at the young monk's animated, abstracted face. Goddess, thought Charlie, mentally employing an oath he had often heard aunt May utter, isn't that what I am? A freak?

Brother Silas smoothed back his shiny coal colored forelock with the palm of his right hand. "It's because I'm a good listener." He said, and nodded. "People were always unloading on me."

Suddenly, (he'd been sitting on the edge of the bed next to Charlie's open book) the young monk drew up his knees and rested the soles of his feet on the edge of the spread, clasping his knees to his chest and grinning. "There was this girl named Annalise that I went out with that told me I had a messiah complex. She said I didn't really have any compassion, I just liked to have everyone depend on me. She said I would be a great Jesuit because I was such a smooth talker. She said that she could see right through me." He sighed. "I liked Annalise. Her only problem was that she thought she knew everything. She said I'd never be able to deal with the vow of chastity." Brother Silas closed his eyes for a moment, then looked down at Charlie. "You know about that? The vow of chastity?"

The tortured history of Catholic sexual ethics had been a topic discussed with a heat undiminished by repetition back at the farm. Charlie nodded.

"What do you think about it?"

Charlie didn't know what to think. He opened and closed his beak. Silas opened his palm on the bedspread.

*I don't know what to think.*

Brother Silas laughed. "Are you chaste, Charlie? What do you rascals get up to in the chicken coop?"

Charlie felt his comb and dewlap radiate with heat.

*I never got up to anything. I went to live in the house when I was just a week old.*

"Just a week old. Well, that's too young for anybody." Brother Silas shook his head. "I can't believe I'm talking about the birds and the bees with a chicken."

Charlie couldn't believe that he was talking about these feelings, which had dazed and confused him ever since he started to read, ever since he'd discovered that Niniane and himself would never be as close as he would like for them to be. He had not felt towards anybody, anything, human or poultry, the way he felt about Niniane, a overwhelming, generous, bittersweet longing. His longing for baptism was somehow different. There was a determination behind it that made it at once more urgent and less intense. He put his beak in Silas' palm. He hesitated, Began to write, hesitated again. Brother Silas looked down curiously. "What's that?" He said. "Morse code?"

Charlie wrote fast, revealing the truth to himself fully, committing himself to this hopeless devotion. *I'm in love with somebody.*

There was a long silence. Brother Silas stiffened, then nodded. Then in a low, soft, flat voice like that of a muezzin he said, "You mean me."

Charlie squawked. *No!* he scratched, emphatically. He looked back up at Brother Silas who was looking down at him with an expression that, once he recognized it, made something terrible well up within him. The young, handsome monk was looking down at him with pity. From Niniane, it was bad enough, but from someone who was supposed to be a Catholic, someone presumably baptized into a recognition of the common lot of all created things, to be the object of such a person's pity was unbearable. Unable to

restrain his outrage, Charlie pecked Brother Silas in the center of his palm, quite viciously, causing it to bleed.

#

Father Angelo came immediately when he was called to the infirmary by Father Lawrence, the nurse practitioner at the monastery. Brother Silas was sitting on the edge of the cot, holding his bloody right hand in his uninjured left hand, and a slow tear crept down his hollow cheek.

The abbot had not realized the location and thus the significance of the injury right away. He'd said "Brother Silas? What happened to your hand?"

Brother Silas lifted his right hand gingerly and held it, palm outward for the abbot to see.

Father Angelo had never seen, and never expected to see, even though he had no doubt as to the authenticity of the phenomena, an actual stigmatic wound. He gasped and crossed himself reflexively.

"Not so fast, Father," Brother Silas had said in a flat voice. "It's not what you think. Charlie stabbed me."

It took the abbot a moment to take this in. Once he did, he was astonished to feel in his eyes the prick of nascent tears. He, who had not been taken aback by the actual existence of Charlie, was taken aback by this sign, of the existence of animosity in Charlie. "He stabbed you?" he said, incredulously.

"He stabbed me," said the young monk. "With his beak. The little so and so pecked me. I guess I deserved it." He looked at the abbot steadily for a moment, then looked down at the slick, waxed tile floor of the infirmary.

Father Angelo sat down on the cot. He stared at Brother Silas' hand for a minute. "It's almost too ironic...." he said.

Brother Silas snorted. "You're telling me."

There was a silence, then Father Angelo's prognathic eyebrows arched. "Madre Dio!" he exclaimed. "Where's Charlie?"

"He's in his room," Brother Silas said. "That's where it happened. We were in there talking, and I guess I pissed him off, so he pecked me. I didn't know he did that kind of thing."

"I didn't either," said Father Angelo. "What on earth did you say?"

"I sort of implied that he was gay."

Father Angelo stood up. "Charlie!?"

Brother Silas shrugged, then winced. Father Angelo sat down on the cot again, gingerly.

"What has been going on between you and Charlie, Silas? I want you to be straig... honest with me."

"Nothing, Father," Brother Silas said. "I mean, not what your thinking. At least, I don't think so..."

The abbot stood up again. "Silas, look at me."

Brother Silas obeyed, like Abraham, reluctantly.

Father Angelo's arms fell to his sides in a gesture of helplessness. "Brother Silas, I'm having trouble imagining what would lead you to question Charlie's sexuality."

Brother Silas frowned. "We were just talking. All I said was..." the monk looked down at his lap, embarrassed. "We were talking about love. That's all. Is that against the rules?"

The abbot crossed his arms against his chest. "Silas, why aren't you talking about these things to me, if they concern you? I am your spiritual director, remember?"

"You told us to talk to Charlie. And he likes talking to me...I'm well-read. What are we supposed to do, talk about theology all the time?"

Father Angelo pointed at the monk's bandaged hand. "Silas, its not a matter of what you're *supposed* to talk about, it's a matter of proportion. Why would you be talking with a chicken... well, his species is irrelevant... but why would you be talking to a visitor, who has his own very pressing concerns, about such intimate matters when you haven't even discussed them with your assigned spiritual director, namely *me*? You have been in this community long enough to realize that we are obliged, as long as we're here, to be circumspect in sharing personal issues. When you form relationships, you must

form them prayerfully. Is this... potentially very inflammatory would the result of careful and considered speaking?"

Brother Silas' left hand involuntarily clenched. "I guess it isn't, Father," he said, clipping his words sullenly. The infirmarian approached with a syringe. Father Angelo stood up.

"Silas, I want you to go to my office as soon as Father Lawrence gives you your tetanus shot. I'm going to get Charlie."

#

In the meantime, Charlie was in his room perched on the edge of his bed, wondering if he could somehow manage to flap his useless wings hard enough to lift himself to the top of the six drawer mahogany dresser that stood an easy five feet off the ground. Once there he could jump, and that would put an end to the humiliation and shame he felt. I lost control, was all he could think. I hurt somebody. I made Brother Silas scream. I'm as bad as any of my brothers. I'll never be a Christian, anyway.

He was debating whether or not it would be more fitting to just stop eating and die that way when Father Angelo came in without a word and, after a once over, said "I want to talk to you and Brother Silas together."

#

Father Angelo sat behind his desk in his office with a window overlooking the ocean and regarded Brother Silas and Charlie, who were seated in two chairs across the desk from him. In the few minutes between leaving Brother Silas in the infirmary and collecting Charlie from his cell, it had occurred to the Abbot not to be overly concerned about the dynamic that was emerging between Brother Silas and Charlie, that the relationship, while it had the potential to alienate the rest of the community, could be fruitful for the two of them in that they both, for different and yet similar reasons, tended towards a more ready engagement with books than persons. This misunderstanding, Father Angelo perceived, could only have come about as the result of a burgeoning trust

beyond that which either one of them had shown towards anyone else in the community, including himself. His earlier chagrin, the Abbot saw now, was an ego-reaction on his own part, fueled by a stubborn surfeit of confidence in his own ability to lead the community. He made a mental note to pray for forgiveness and renewed faith, and then turned his full attention to the unhappy friends before him. He stroked his beard while Brother Silas rubbed his uninjured palm nervously on the skirt of his cassock and Charlie picked at the feathers of his unbandaged wing. Getting the two of them to talk together when Charlie could only really be 'heard' by one person at a time would be tricky. He searched his mind for a solution and decided that, as his object was to nurture trust, he would have to begin by trusting.

"Brother Silas," the abbot said. "I would like you to move your chair closer to Charlie's so that the two of you can communicate more easily."

Brother Silas looked at Charlie, and Charlie looked at Brother Silas. Charlie noted that Brother Silas was paler than usual. My Goddess! The chicken thought. Is he afraid of me? I couldn't have hurt him that bad! All it was was a little peck- I didn't even know what I was doing!

Brother Silas moved his chair over until the arm of it was touching the arm of Charlie's. He set his left hand flat, palm up, on the two armrests and waited for further instructions.

"Thank you, Brother Silas," said Father Angelo. "I was hoping you wouldn't mind transmitting for Charlie. It seems better that way to me. Unless either one of you objects."

Brother Silas looked at Charlie, who swiveled his head from side to side to approximate the human gesture of negation.

"Great." Said Father Angelo informally. "First of all, just let me say that I'm not here to pass judgment on anybody. I just want to know what's going on. Can I start with you Charlie?"

Charlie nodded and poised his beak above Brother Silas' left palm.

"Brother Silas tells me you pecked him. Is that right?"

Charlie raised his head and nodded.

"Will you tell me why?"

Charlie began scratching on Silas' outstretched palm. Brother Silas dutifully repeated the chicken's words verbatim.

*I don't know why I did that. I wasn't thinking. I guess I lost my mind for a minute.* He paused and looked up at Silas. *I'm sorry.*

Brother Silas shrugged his right shoulder. "It's not a big deal."

Father Angelo pursed his mouth. "I wouldn't say it's not a big deal, Silas. Obviously it is. What do you think got into you, Charlie?"

Charlie hung his head for a moment. His comb felt so warm he thought it must be glowing.

*I was mad, I guess, about something Brother Silas asked me.*

"What was that?"

Charlie looked up once again at his mouthpiece. He began scratching, reluctantly.

Brother Silas blushingly repeated the chicken's words. *He asked me if I was in love with him.*

Father Angelo glanced at the young monk, who closed his eyes. "I see."

The abbot took a deep breath. "That made you mad, Charlie?"

*I guess.*

"But why?"

*I guess it embarrassed me.*

"What's so embarrassing about the idea of being in love with Brother Silas?"

Brother Silas opened his eyes wide. He was so taken aback he didn't repeat Charlie's reply.

"Did Charlie answer me just then, Brother Silas?" Father Angelo rested his chin in his hands.

Charlie scratched again. *Nothing.*

Father Angelo leaned back in his swivel chair. "You know, people who live together closely very frequently develop complicated feelings for one another. It's a perfectly natural part of being a community. The important thing is to figure out how to deal with these feelings, with *all* of our feelings, in a constructive way. I know you haven't made any sort of profession regarding our Order, but Charlie, for better or for worse, I'm prepared to consider you as a part of our community for as long as you remain

with us, and I hope that if you did find yourself feeling particularly drawn to Brother Silas or to any of our Brothers, you would feel safe discussing it with me."

Charlie suddenly wanted more than anything to be far away from the monastery and its no longer merely religious, but indeed overwhelmingly, messily human community.

*I would.* He scratched. *But I'm not in love with Brother Silas. Honestly. If I made him think I was, I'm really sorry.*

Father Angelo looked at Brother Silas as soon as the monk finished repeating this last reply of Charlie's. "Brother Silas, has Charlie done or said anything to indicate that he might be in love with you- romantically?"

Brother Silas' eyes were on his lap. "No. I just jumped to conclusions. He was telling me..." He glanced at Charlie. "He was telling me that he was in love with somebody."

"And you thought you might be that somebody."

"Well, yes." Brother Silas pressed his lips together.

"Well, Charlie has told us that he isn't in love with you. As a matter of fact... Charlie, when you realized that Brother Silas had made that assumption, what did you do?"

Charlie paused to recollect. *I said 'no.'*

Brother Silas repeated this, in a rather mumbling manner.

The Abbot raised one eyebrow. "Well, that sounds pretty straightforward to me. So what *is* going on here. I'm afraid I have to ask...Silas, are you in love with Charlie?"

The handsome monk's jaw hung slack and his forehead creased as he gaped at his superior. "What?!"

"Are you in love with Charlie?"

"Father, he's a chicken!"

"I'm well aware of that."

"That's *bestiality!*"

The abbot tapped on his lips a few times with his index finger. "That's interesting. I wasn't thinking in terms of sexual expression, but evidently you were. Let me put it another way. Are you attracted to Charlie?"

"Are you *crazy*?"

The abbot laughed. "Calm down, brother. This isn't an inquisition. I'm just asking."

"Your *accusing* me of something *sick*."

"I'm asking you a legitimate question. One that I would ask anyone in this situation. Come on Silas, you know enough psychology. Desire is often projected onto its unconscious object..."

Brother Silas stood up, jostling the two chairs that were touching. "I can't *believe* this... this chicken pecks the shit out of me and I get the third degree..."

"Silas, please sit down. No one really thinks you want to violate Charlie."

"Then what's all this supposed to mean!"

"All what?"

"All this Freudian projection bullcrap!"

"Is it all just bullcrap?"

"I thought you were supposed to be a priest!"

"I am a priest. And I am at this time your superior, and I am asking you to sit *down* and listen to me!"

Brother Silas huffed and sat down.

Father Angelo leaned forward. "Thank you. Now I want both of you to listen to me. I'm not sure what's gone on between you two over the past few weeks, but whether it's love or lust or just male bonding, it's clearly disruptive and it's got to stop. Any sort of particular friendship wreaks havoc in a monastic community. Now both of you are newcomers, and particularly vulnerable to this sort of thing, and I knew that when I suggested you be the first to look in on Charlie, Silas, but I'd never dreamed it would get this out of hand... no pun intended. What this tells me, more than anything else, is that the two of you are both extremely lonely. And the erotic element- I know of nothing else to call it- tells me that you are both struggling with a perceived call to chastity in celibacy. I'm more concerned about this in regard to you, Silas, than with Charlie, as you're under my authority as a postulant."

"But I swear to you, I'm not hot for Charlie!"

"But you are boiling over with your projections, which means you're overheated. Now, Brother, this doesn't have to be the end of the world, but merely a difficulty to be lifted up in prayer. As for Charlie..."

Charlie, who had been mesmerized by the vitality of the preceding scene, startled so that he nearly fell off his stack of Lives. He hearkened to the abbot.

"Charlie, there are other ways to express your anger than by pecking."

Brother Silas rested his left palm back on the shared armrests.

*I know. I'm sorry.*

"I know you are. Nevertheless, violence is violence. I wonder if you would accept a penance, Charlie?"

*A penance?*

"A discipline to help you realize the importance of self-restraint."

*Okay. Scratched Charlie. .*

"Charlie, I'd like you share with Brother Silas the time it takes him to clean and care for and dress his wound until it's healed completely. I want you to participate in the trouble it takes him and the infirmarian to attend to this wound. And I would like for you to include in your daily prayers a prayer for his peace of mind and his vocation."

*Okay. Said Charlie.*

Father Angelo leaned back in his swivel chair again and he grinned. "This is the most bizarre conversation I've ever had, to be honest." He began to chuckle. "Brother Silas, you make Narcissus himself look unassuming. What would I do without you?"

Brother Silas' eyes widened.

"Is there anything else we need to talk about right now?" Said Father Angelo, picking up a pencil pointedly.

Silas and Charlie both shook their heads.

"Then, our meeting is over." Said Father Angelo.

## Chapter Fourteen/ Rome

The next day, Charlie was in his room reading the *Notebooks* of Simone Weil when Father Angelo tapped on the door, waited about fifteen seconds, and then let himself in.

"Charlie," he said, kneeling beside the bed to be eye level with the chicken. "I just got off the phone with the Bishop. There's news."

Charlie's comb stiffened. *Are they going to baptize me?*

"They haven't decided yet."

Charlie's comb drooped. *What's the news?*

"The pope wants to meet with you. You're going to have to go to Rome, Charlie."

Charlie froze. He did not know exactly where Rome was, but he had gathered from the encyclopedia that it was even farther away than the monastery was from the farm. Another move... just when he was beginning to get used to this strange place! He placed his beak into the abbot's palm. *I don't want to go. I like it here, now.* He paused. *Most of the time.*

Father Angelo smiled, "You aren't going to Rome to stay, Charlie. Just to meet with the Pope, and maybe a few other interested parties. If I were you, I would think of it as an honor. There are many, many human Catholics that would give anything to have a chance to meet the Pope, and he wants to meet with you! I don't want to make your decision for you, Charlie, but I do think that this will further your cause considerably. Do you need some time to think it over?"

Charlie lifted his head from the abbot's palm and thought for a moment. He recalled that there were many Christians, called Protestants, who did not like the Pope, and did not take into account his opinion regarding much, though they seemed to be in agreement with Catholics on most other things. Among Christians, Charlie did not yet know any Protestants, and imagined them to be a contentious, undisciplined lot. At one

point soon after Charlie had learned from Dillis about the practice of Baptism, he had become curious about that group of Protestants known as Baptists; thinking that perhaps they, in light of the name they went by, would be the ones to approach regarding his own baptism. Niniane had told him that her family had always been Baptist, before asserting him that she and May and Irene were of course, no such thing, Baptists being, in the opinion of the women of the farm, notorious for their bigotry. Now, faced with the prospect of going to Rome and meeting the Pope, Charlie thought once again of the Protestants, of whom no one he had encountered so far, from Niniane to Simone Weil, spoke with any commendation. For a moment he considered telling Father Angelo that he would rather stay where he was and perhaps become a Baptist, but the moment this alternative occurred, he dismissed it. He had a sense that Father Angelo, as well as the Bishop and perhaps even Father Frank would take such a defection personally. The Bishop, Charlie knew, was already in Rome arguing for his cause. Father Angelo had been obliged to curtail his own activities, as well as those of the Brothers, for the amount of time that Charlie remained in hiding at the monastery. These Catholics were going to considerable trouble to see that Charlie got baptized specifically Catholic, and Charlie did not want all their trouble to be for nothing. But for a significant moment Charlie found himself wondering, as Father Angelo waited patiently for him to agree to meet the Pope, whether it truly mattered in the end whether he was Protestant or Catholic? It was the first, but not the last time his miraculous mind dwelled on that question. For the rest of his life the doctrine of Transubstantiation, as defined by the Roman Catholic Church, would torture him.

He regarded Father Angelo, who sat serenely beside him, his palm open and waiting for the word from Charlie.

*Is the pope going to baptize me?* Charlie scratched. Maybe if he just went ahead and met the Pope it would all be over with.

"I don't know, Charlie. It's possible, I guess, if he decides it would be... prudent."

*What does 'prudent' mean?*

"It's a virtue, Charlie. In this sense, it means... umm..." Father Angelo's gaze fell on a passage from the book Charlie had been reading. "It means something like... avoiding danger."

Charlie was satisfied with the wisdom in avoiding danger. He had just that morning had the bandage removed from his wing. *When do I leave?*

Father Angelo's heart leapt with relief at this implicit assent from Charlie. "As soon as they make the arrangements. I would imagine in less than a week."

Less than a week and he could possibly be baptized. Charlie began to experience a flutter of excitement in his gizzard. He tried without success to smile at the abbot.

*Are you coming with me?*

"Charlie, I can't. I have to stay here at the monastery. I'm in charge here, remember? I know you can't go alone, though. The Bishop is going to meet you at the airport in Rome, but I can't just put you on a plane by yourself. Anything could happen. I thought I'd ask Brother Silas to go and look after you on your journey." Father Angelo arched one thick prognathic eyebrow and suppressed a smile. "I think I can trust you two."

Charlie's comb and dewlap throbbed with embarrassment. Then a thought occurred. *I have to tell Niniane!* He scratched with urgency.

Father Angelo smiled sadly. "I don't see how you can do that Charlie. She can't come here, you know. Leave that to me. I'll make sure Niniane knows where you're going, and why."

*How long will I have to stay in Rome?* Scratched Charlie.

"Probably not for very long, Charlie. The Pope isn't in good health these days. He'll probably only be able to be with you for a very short while. Once he's had his time with you, I don't see why you would have to stay any longer at the Vatican. But there's really no way to tell, at this point. The Bishop will know more than I what this trip will involve. I'll ask him as soon as he calls."

*When can we go back to the farm?*

Father Angelo looked away. He felt sure that the farm would never again be a secure environment for Charlie, that in fact the only safe place for Charlie to stay for the remainder of his life, whether he was Baptized or not, would be the monastery.

"Charlie, do you remember the story of Jonah and the Whale? In the Old Testament?"

*Yes.* Scratched Charlie. The story was in fact one of his favorites. *Why?*

"It's often the case that a prophet is led...by God, of course... far from home to accomplish his mission. It's one of the sorrows of the prophetic calling. "

*But I'm not a prophet.* Scratched Charlie.

There was a pause. "What are you, then, Charlie?" The abbot said. There was no reply from Charlie, and Father Angelo withdrew his hand and stood. "I expect to hear back from the bishop this afternoon. I will tell him that you are willing, and we will make arrangements for you and Brother Silas to fly to Rome. I know that this is difficult for you Charlie; but I also know that God will grant you the strength you need. At least, I will pray for Him to do so. Remember your Swinburne, Charlie..."

As the heavy wooden door to his cell closed and clicked shut upon Father Angelo's admonition, Charlie wished, not for the first or last time, that he had never even heard of Christianity.

#

Arrangements were made through the Vatican to fly Charlie and Brother Silas first class to Rome via Air Italia. In the interest of secrecy, a ticket was issued only to Brother Silas. Charlie, whom the Vatican spokesman told the airline representatives was a symbolic gift from the largely rural Diocese of Eastern North Carolina to the Holy Father, was to stay with Brother Silas at all times and to be kept enclosed in a cardboard pet carrier. A private security company was hired to accompany Silas and his precious cargo to the plane in North Carolina, and an Italian counterpart likewise ensured his safe passage from the Rome airport to the hotel in Vatican City.

Charlie saw it all through the woefully small air holes of the pet carrier. He did not like the sensation of flying inside an airplane as much as he thought he might. Throughout the entire flight he was lightheaded and nauseous. This limited his ability to communicate, which was just as well as he and Brother Silas would not have safely communicated among the other members of first class, anyhow. The limousine ride from the Rome airport to their lodgings in Vatican City was much nicer. Brother Silas thoughtfully held the pet carrier on his left knee, which he kept crossed over his right,

which raised Charlie just high enough to see, with one eye pressed against one of the air holes of his box, the busy streets of Rome, Italy.

The hotel room itself was the epitome of European opulence. Charlie and Brother Silas, found themselves overwhelmed by the sheer amount of open space they were granted in this private suite, in which they were protected against witnesses and Charlie was able to roam about and communicate with Silas as much as it pleased the two of them. After having been cooped up in a box for the past 20 hours by the circumspection necessary to transfer him safely and secretly from the monastery in North Carolina to Vatican City, having an entire suite to move around in felt like heaven to Charlie.

*It's beautiful here!* Scratched Charlie into Silas' hand as the young monk carried him on a tour of their accommodations. *Look at all these paintings!*

Silas set Charlie down on the edge of one of their two enormous canopied beds, and then sat down beside him. Through the east window they could see the spires, domes, and parapets of St. Peter's Basilica.

"It's amazing..." breathed Brother Silas. "I still can't even believe it. I can't believe I'm sitting here, in a hotel room in Vatican City! You know what this is, Charlie! It's an absolute miracle! I never once even *dreamed*..." He broke off, grabbed Charlie, and squeezed the chicken to his chest in a paroxysm of gratitude.

Charlie submitted to this stoically, then wriggled a bit until Brother Silas put him down on the bed. Charlie preened his ruffled feathers for a moment, and then placed his beak in the young monk's palm. *Are you trying to kill me?*

Brother Silas grinned. "And to think I thought you were a hoax. You're the best, Charlie. You're the real thing."

*Quit it.* Charlie's comb was throbbing. He had never before seen anyone so excited and happy. Not even Niniane, as far as he knew, had ever felt so overjoyed by anything associated with him. Her pleasure in him had been tempered at first by her fear that she might be losing her own sanity; and then later by a more personal, but to Charlie a disappointingly maternal anxiety. Now, on account of him, Brother Silas was having an experience that, at least so far, was making him profoundly happy. Regarding the

exultant monk beside him, Charlie realized that whether or not he was baptized, his existence now possessed intrinsic meaning.

Brother Silas lay back on the bed, and smiled up at the high ceiling. Charlie bent over his upturned palm. *What do we do now?*

Brother Silas sat up. They had nothing planned until 10 o'clock the next morning, the occasion of Charlie's audience with the Pope. "I don't know about you..." he said. "But I'm calling room service. It's not everyday you get to eat real Italian food. In Italy! I'm getting Lasagna and red wine and dessert!"

Charlie, whose diet consisted chiefly of the feed they'd brought with them from North Carolina, felt a bit left out. *I guess I'll just have the same old thing.*

Silas put a hand on Charlie and pushed down, so that the chicken bounced lightly on the bed. "Come on, Charles. Live a little. I bet a little red wine won't hurt you. And listen, Brother Anthony has relatives here, and he told me once that they're always showing hot topless women on Roman TV late at night..."

When the food and wine arrived, and the late night programming began, Charlie began to enjoy- really enjoy- without any of his usual anxiety- his trip to Vatican City to meet with the Pope.

#

After Charlie retired to his carrying case for the night, he had trouble sleeping. Brother Silas, having been obliged to partake of almost the entire contents of the bottle of red wine, had fallen asleep with the television on, so throughout the suite a pale blue light danced and flickered against the walls and furniture, against all the surfaces of the room. Towards the wee hours of the morning, however, Charlie experienced something like a dream. In it, he was standing in an enormous, high ceilinged gallery, somewhat like the hallway back at the monastery, full of dark, solemn portraits, but the space was infinitely wider and more majestic; and there was a hidden and muted but unmistakable overhead source of light. The portraits were of humans, and no details stood out to Charlie, thought there was a sense in which he could see that the faces were all different, and in time, one portrait among many engaged his scrutiny. It was an image that gave the

impression at once of contemporaneity as well as great antiquity, of a serenely smiling dark haired woman standing with a single candle held in one slim hand. Staring at it, Charlie realized that he could see his own tiny reflection in the gleam of the painted woman's incredibly lifelike eyes; then, in the world of the dream the image of the woman was no longer a painting.

As if he knew that he did not need, as he needed in normal life, any medium through which he must speak other than his own organized thoughts, Charlie asked the painting silently what her name was.

Then without any discernible movement, the lady was beside Charlie, holding him, giving him the impression that she had always held him. She held open her palm, the one that had, in the portrait, held the candle, below his beak, and as Charlie watched, one of the delicate creases in the center of that palm seemed to take on infinite dimensions, becoming a chasm so limitless and dark that Charlie felt himself, body and soul, swallowed and comprehended by that darkness as if it was itself an irresistible, insatiable, willful entity, independent, in the end, of that being of ineffable beauty that Charlie had seen in the painting. Charlie's final thought, as he felt his very self dissolve into the darkness of his dream, was a desperate repetition of his question to the beautiful Woman- *who are you?*

Charlie woke up to sun streaming in through the uncurtained east window of the suite, and, giving in to a now irresistible impulse of nature, he crowed; which woke up Brother Silas rather rudely.

#

Charlie and Silas were waiting nervously over a sumptuous room-service breakfast neither one could do much more than sample when a gaunt, sunken-eyed priest in an immaculately starched and ironed black clerical suit arrived at their hotel suite to guide them to St. Peter's Basilica. He introduced himself as Msgr. Klaeber, and he escorted Brother Silas, with Charlie back in his carrier, to a limousine idling in front of the hotel entrance.

A uniformed chauffeur who was wearing mirrored sunglasses against the bright Italian sunshine drove the limousine. Msgr. Klaeber sat in the back of the vehicle, facing Brother Silas and Charlie, who peered out at the austere looking priest through an air hole of the carrying case.

"The Holy Father..." Father Klaeber said in heavily accented but impeccable English, "Tells me that he very much looks forward to your meeting."

"So am I, Monsignor," said Brother Silas, oblivious to the fact that the old German cleric had been addressing himself to Charlie. The young monk had a splitting headache, which made him, under the circumstances, overanxious to appear attentive and obedient, lest someone detect that he was hung-over. "And I know that the Pope will be very impressed with our wonderful chicken."

"The chicken," Father Klaeber said agreeably. "Is indeed wonderful." He looked out the window. "Here we are." He said. "If you will stay here in the car until I return? And then, follow me and I will take you to the Chapel where the Holy Father will receive you privately. I think it would be best..." he said, stepping out of the limousine and leaning his lean, balding head back in before shutting the door "If you did not speak to anyone, Brother.... I'm so sorry?"

"Silas." Said Brother Silas, a bit huffily. "Of course, Monsignor. I'm as anxious as anybody that we don't blow Charlie's..." here he raised one eyebrow and smiled at the older cleric, "...cover."

Father Klaeber smiled, bowed, and made his way up the stairs and into the entrance of the wing of the basilica. Brother Silas exhaled through his nose. "Nazi." He muttered.

Charlie reached for his palm.

*What was that you said?*

"I said Nazi. I bet he's an old Nazi that they've hidden here since the forties."

Charlie remembered Anne Frank. His feathers stood on end. He squawked.

*What are we going to do!*

Silas pulled the box onto his lap, opened it and peered inside. Charlie's head was wedged in a corner, and it looked like he was shivering. Brother Silas groaned, stuck his

head in the box, and whispered hotly. "I was just joking, for Christ's sake. Why do you have to take everything so seriously!"

Charlie gave the monk's hand a quick nip. *There's more where that came from*, he warned, reminding himself of Irene. *I'm really nervous. This is my destiny.*

"Well, there's no reason to attack me again," " said Brother Silas. "I'm nervous, too."

#

When he returned to the car, Msgr. Klaeber led them through the main entrance of St. Peter's into the magnificent sanctuary, and from there into a private chapel where he told them to make themselves comfortable, that the Holy Father would be with them shortly.

Brother Silas took Charlie out of his box and placed him on his knee so that he could look around the space.

*It's like the Mary Chapel at home... at the monastery.*

"Yes." Brother Silas whispered reverently.

The chapel, which had windows facing west, was filled with a soft morning light which made the whitewashed walls look innocently open rather than blank. This light made the wooden pews gleam and the golden monstrance on the altar and the gold corpus on the marble crucifix above the altar shine like stars.

Charlie looked at Brother Silas, whose eyes were closed. Clearly, the young monk was praying, something which he often admitted having difficulty doing in company.

Charlie rather wished that the young monk felt like talking to him rather than God, at such a trying time. The chicken felt as if his every nerve was tense to the point of snapping.

Charlie was about to jump off Brother Silas' knee and pace up and down the length of the pew they were sitting on when Msgr. Klaeber strode in holding the arm of an extremely stooped old man clad in yards of vestments as white as the wispy strands of

hair that proceeded from underneath his beanie. "Gentlemen... and gentle chicken... I present to you His Holiness the Pope.

Brother Silas immediately stood, then bowed, his left arm bent at the elbow with Charlie resting in the crook of it. "Your Holiness." He greeted the frail, nodding patriarch. "This is such an honor. I'm Brother Silas Heyward, and this is..." he placed his free hand on Charlie's tingling comb. "This is Charlie."

The Pope nodded some more, and with a sort of creaking, wordless vocalization held out his right hand, which was shaking.

Brother Silas bent and kissed, with great reverence, the Pope's Fisherman's ring.

Msgr. Klaeber bent and whispered a snatch of a Slavic sounding language into the Pope's ear, and the pope nodded more distinctly. Msgr. Klaeber then stood and addressed Brother Silas and Charlie. "I will be back in a half hour or so. My prayers will be with you all in the meantime." And with this he executed a bow and an about face, and left the Pope alone in the Chapel with them.

The Pope gestured shakily toward the pew they had been sitting on. He said, in very heavily accented English, "Sit, please."

Brother Silas sat, still holding Charlie.

The pope eased into the pew beside the two of them. "God Bless you both." He murmured, as he regarded Charlie. "So this is the famous Charlie. How do you do, Charlie?" He held his palsied hand open and palm up under Charlie's beak.

*Fine, thank you, Your Holiness.* Scratched Charlie.

The Pope blinked his eyes several times, withdrew his hand, and looked up at Brother Silas. "It is true." He stated. "The chicken is writing in English with his beak. Very remarkable. Very odd to experience. Quite amazing."

"It certainly is, Your Holiness," said Brother Silas. "And that's just the beginning. Not only can he communicate, but he reads theology!"

The Pope's eyes, which seemed to be almost completely obscured by the effects of age, seemed to become sharper. "He reads theology?"

Brother Silas nodded. "He sure does! Your Holiness."

The Pope blinked. He held the fingertips of his shaking hands together and momentarily still against his lips for a moment and then spoke through them in his

quivering, high pitched, nearly incomprehensible English. "Which theologians does he read?"

Brother Silas was so surprised by the question that it took him a moment to reply. "Well, Your Holiness, I've seen him reading Simone Weil, for one..."

"Ah." Said the Pope. "Perhaps he is familiar with her commentary on the *Our Father*?"

Brother Silas opened his palm under Charlie's beak. "I'll have to ask Charlie, Your Holiness. Just a moment..."

But the Pope reached out and placed his own hand on Brother Silas' before Charlie had a chance to answer. "I wonder," the old man said. "If Charlie and I might have a few moments alone. There are several questions I wish to ask of our friend the chicken, and I would like for him to be at liberty to answer me with the utmost candidness. You do not mind stepping out into the Basilica...?"

Brother Silas scrambled to his feet. "I would be more than honored, Your Holiness." He said, and, bowing, he backed out of the Chapel into the grandeur beyond, leaving Charlie to his private audience with the Pope, from which they emerged a short time later, with the Pope visibly shaken and Charlie no closer than he had been before to the baptism he desired.

## Chapter Fifteen/ Home

Brother Silas begged and pleaded, but Charlie would not communicate with him. Not when they arrived back at their hotel suite, nor during the return flight or during the ride back to the monastery. What was there to say?

He took to his bed and would not rouse himself to read anything. Father Angelo brought him meals and sat by his bedside for a few minutes on a regular basis, but it did not seem to make any difference to Charlie, who had become as unreachable spiritually as any other chicken.

#

Within a few days it was clear that Charlie was in danger of wasting away. Every few hours Father Angelo or Brother Silas or one of the other monks would let themselves into his cell to pray for him and bring him feed, but Charlie lost altogether the will to live, and stopped eating. The situation was officially grave. Father Angelo telephoned Niniane to tell her to expect the worst, and she became hysterical. She took her mother's car keys without asking and drove straight to Dillis' apartment across town. He took her into his dim, musty bedroom and attempted to embrace her, but she twisted herself out of his arms and sat hunched over on the side of the frameless mattress that Dillis used for a bed, rocking herself and moaning.

"Dillis," she said to him over and over. "He's going to die. Do something."

"Niniane, what can I do?" He protested, but even as he did so, a determination was forming in his mind.

Dillis went to his window and looked out at his Duster in the parking lot. What Charlie needs right now, he told himself, are his friends. "To hell with this!" He said. "We're bringing him home!"

Niniane shook her head. "We can't!" She moaned. "He won't be safe in the city."

Dillis walked over to his bed and stood above his dejected girlfriend. His hands were on his hips. "He's not safe anywhere if he's dying! He might as well be with us." He reached for Niniane's arm and led her out to his car.

#

By midnight that evening, they reached the gate that closed off the driveway of the monastery. Dillis had parked his car some ways down the gravel road that branched off of the island's two-lane highway. "Stay here," he told Niniane, who had been uncommonly quiet for the entire ride. "And I'll check out the scene and figure out how to get in."

She acknowledged him with a slight nod. It was so unlike her to do as he asked that he for a moment he felt like a bully. Shrugging this off, he walked the rest of the way to the grounds. It was very dark out, with clouds obscuring most of the stars. A full moon was in the sky. Dillis stood at the tall wrought iron gate that disappeared, on either side into tall grass-patch studded dunes that looked as though they would be teeming with scorpions and scores of other nocturnal dangers. He wondered how they were ever going to cross this boundary to get to Charlie.

He tucked his jeans into his socks, tightened the laces on his sneakers, and took a running start up one of the dunes, but the sand simply gave beneath him until he was knee deep in it. He clambered out, grabbed the rails of the gate and tried to hoist himself up it hand over hand, but his thin arms hadn't the strength to even lift him off the ground more than a foot. He let himself down and sighed, already spent. All along the three-hour drive he told himself that there must be a way into the monastery. He'd been sneaking into movie theaters and apartment complex swimming pools and on and off the high school grounds for most of his life, and it never crossed his mind that a monastery would be more formidably secure than those more profit driven places. He bent and brushed sand off the legs of his jeans. That's why Charlie's here, dumbass. He said to himself. This place is a fortress.

He sighed. He thought he might as well go back to his car and wait in there until morning. Before they left his apartment, he'd gathered up what was left of his last

paycheck and snaked a fifty-dollar bill from his mother's pocketbook. This thievery did not trouble his conscience in that this was an emergency, but he didn't want to spend anything unnecessarily. His plan was to simply abduct Charlie, take the bird wherever he wanted to go, fulfill his every wish, show him parts of the world he'd never seen, and just in general try to get his mind off of religion for awhile. He felt that Charlie needed to gain perspective. It was important not to get too wrapped up in one thing, as Dillis knew from experience. Unfortunately, he knew as well that getting out of a rut more often than not costs money, but for his chicken chum, and his girl, Dillis was prepared to spare no expense.

But how the hell was he going to get over this gate and get to Charlie!

Dillis stood staring up at the shadowy spikes that poked up from the top rail of the gate and did not even see the tall, hooded figure approaching from the other side. A deep, resonant voice assaulted him like a shot in the dark and Dillis jumped.

"What are you doing here!" The voice said.

Dillis gave a yelp and looked in the direction of the voice. A shadowy, hooded figure was fast approaching, its sandaled feet slapping the paved driveway on the other side of the gate.

"Nothing!" Dillis said. He turned around and started running.

The hooded figure pushed a button on the hitch of the gate and slowly, with a humming noise, the gate began to open inward. "Stop!" The voice called, but Dillis kept running. He was so terrified now that he forgot all about Charlie.

He was almost at his car when the monk tackled him. For a full minute they struggled together on the gravel road until Dillis found himself expertly pinned underneath a panting young monk who looked, in that darkness, with his blazing eyes and flowing robes, just like a vampire. Then he heard a shriek. Suddenly there was a thump that pressed the monk against him so that for a moment Dillis could not get his breath. Then the monk rolled off of him, and Dillis scrambled up to see the monk and Niniane on the ground beside him, entwined like shameless lovers in the gravel. "Hey!" He said. He caught Niniane's arm just as she reached back to throw a punch.

“Get off me!” The monk shouted. “Get off me! Help! Rape! This is private property! I’ll have you arrested for trespassing, assault... I mean it! You don’t know who you’re dealing with...”

Dillis pulled Niniane off the writhing, shouting monk who then scrambled to his sandaled feet, shaking dust from the skirt of his habit. He backed away, and took in the image of Niniane, with her long hair, full skirt, and heaving breast. “A girl!” he cried. “What are *you* doing here! This is a monastery! And *you!*” he turned to Dillis. “You were breaking and entering! Don’t think I don’t know what you’re after, either. Well, you can forget it. We have a state of the art security system here. You’ll never get him, never. He’s under the protection of the Diocese of Eastern North Carolina, and he always will be.”

“No he isn’t!” Niniane shouted, her eyes blazing in the darkness. “You and your god-damn church won’t even admit he has a soul! That’s why he’s in there *dying* you Christian piece of shit! You better let me in there, or I swear to god I’ll drive this car right through that gate.” She stepped forward menacingly and the monk backed away. His hand covered his mouth. “Who told you he was dying?”

“The *Bishop!*” Niniane screeched. Her fists clenched. “Let me see him! Now! Before it’s too late!”

The monk peered at the hysterical girl under the eerie light of the moon. “Who *are* you?” he said.

She saw no reason to give this catholic lackey her name. She turned to Dillis. “Give me the keys,” she ordered.

“Niniane...” he said, “Calm down...”

“You’re Niniane?” The monk said. He stepped forward to get a closer look. “Charlie’s...”

“Friend.” She said through her teeth. “Charlie’s *best* friend. And I’ve come to take him home. He’s had enough of your phony religion. He’s coming home with me, where he’ll have some *respect*.”

The monk turned to Dillis. “Then you’re...”

“Dillis.” Said Dillis. “Look, Father. We really think Charlie ought to come with us... we know he won’t eat...”

The monk interrupted him. "Can I see some I.D.?"

"What!" Shouted Niniane, but the two young men both ignored her. Dillis pulled his wallet out of his pocket and handed the monk his driver's license. The monk held it close to his face in the dim moonlight, then handed it back. "So you're Dillis. I've heard a lot about you."

"You have?"

The monk nodded. "Yep. Charlie told me that you were his best buddy. And this is Niniane?" he said, regarding her.

"Yes." Said Dillis.

The monk placed one hand on his cheek. "He said you were an angel."

Niniane bit her lip and looked away. The monk let his hand fall to his side. "I'm Silas." he said. "I went to the Vatican with Charlie. I wish... I wish I could have been more help, but..." he sighed. "I was so sure it would all work out... just because there's no *precedent* doesn't have to mean..."

Dillis touched the monk's shoulder. "Listen... can we at least see him..."

Brother Silas bowed his head. "Of course. Follow me."

#

Brother Silas took them through the main gate, then through a smaller gate, which enclosed a sparse orchard, then through a side door, which he unlocked, which opened into the dormitory hallway.

The monk grabbed Dillis by the shoulder, pointed to a closed door, and whispered. "He's in there."

Dillis nodded.

"You're going to have to keep really quiet. *We're* going to have to be quiet. None of the brothers sleep well."

That didn't surprise Dillis. He wouldn't sleep well either if he was a monk. He reached for Niniane, who took his hand as if it were a lifeline. Brother Silas loped ahead of them, unlocked the door to Charlie's cell, and ushered them inside.

Charlie sat motionless on the bed like a broody hen, with his legs folded beneath his body. His head drooped slightly, and his eyes were open but taking in nothing. The sudden entrance of the three humans into his room elicited from him no reaction. The foot of the bed was piled with thick hardbound books, and a few of them were open. The sight of this filled Dillis with boldness.

He rushed over to kneel beside the bed, reached out and began to stroke Charlie's neck and back. "Charlie." He whispered. "It's me! Dillis."

A slight motion seemed to course through the chicken's inert body. In the darkness it was difficult to be sure, but Dillis thought that perhaps Charlie blinked. Dillis looked over his shoulder at Brother Silas, who was standing behind him with arms folded. "He knows me!" Dillis said.

Brother Silas said nothing.

Dillis put his hand out under Charlie's beak. "What's wrong, Charlie? You can talk to me..."

But Charlie's mind was as empty and fragmented as the shell from which he'd emerged earlier that summer. Only one image remained, and it was upon this image that Charlie, or what was left of him in his depressed state, dwelled continuously. It was the image of that chasm which lay in the palm of the hand of the Woman in his dream.

Dillis thought he saw Charlie's head move slightly downwards toward his hand, then stop, but in the dark it was hard to tell. "Let's turn on the light." He said over his shoulder to Brother Silas.

"We better not." the monk whispered. "The abbot is always getting up in the middle of the night and wandering around. Why do you think I was outside?"

"All right, all right." Dillis said. "Don't you want to get out of here Charlie?"

At that Dillis was sure that Charlie did blink.

Dillis turned to Niniane, who stood as if turned to stone, her knuckles against her lips. Not since his days in the coop, before he began to communicate, had Charlie looked to her so much like any other chicken. It was as if he had been reduced, in some horrible, mysterious way, to mere flesh, incapable of consciousness or caring. For a moment she was returned to her bedroom at the farm that very first day that he wrote to her, asking herself if she was going crazy. "Niniane?" Dillis stood, feeling like a failure, and came

to her. He led her gently to the side of the bed. “You’ve got to try. He won’t say anything to me.”

Niniane let Dillis take her hand and spread it out, palm up, in front of Charlie. That posture, so familiar, so intimate, seemed to awaken something within her, and she bent her head so that her long hair fell forward, a few locks of it draping across Charlie’s inert form. “Charlie,” she whispered. “My darling, is there anything I can do?”

Maybe it was the tear of sorrow that dripped off her nose onto his comb, maybe it was faint caress of her hair upon his feathers, or her open palm before him, maybe it was the fact that she knelt by his side and waited for a response from him for as long as she had ever waited for anything that broke the spell he was under, that reached and revived what the denial of his soul had laid waste in him, the ability to communicate. Unable to deny his deepest desire, he bent his head and spelled out for her his only hope for salvation. *Yes*, he scratched. *Eat me*.

### *EPILOGUE*

Did he mean it literally? It's difficult to say, for of course Niniane only wept in reply, and Charlie never repeated the request. What can be said, however, is that Charlie did not remain in the monastery. In the end he decided, against everyone else's better judgment, that the only place left for him to be was the coop from which he had come, where he could blend in and be safe and anonymous as long as he didn't read or write anything.

Securing Charlie in a pillowcase, Niniane and Dillis and Brother Silas snuck Charlie and a bottle of communion wine out of the monastery, and Dillis drove the two hundred and fifty miles down the length of the island and inland to the farm on the edge of the coastal plain where Charlie had been hatched. For the duration of the trip, the conversation between the four was minimal. Charlie preferred to stare out at the night sky from his vantage point in Niniane's lap as Dillis (and a progressively drunken Brother Silas in the backseat) smoked cigarette after cigarette and sang along lustily with the raucous, thumping, screeching sounds that issued from the car's speakers. Charlie did not know if he would ever again experience such exhilaration, but he knew that for the moment he felt free.

Then, with all the solemnity of a midnight mass, the three humans placed their living booty onto one of the posts of the chicken yard fence, where he stood for a moment under the light of the moon, looking like the full grown rooster he had become in the eight short weeks since his hatching.

Without looking back-- because he could not bear to-- Charlie, with an impressive hop emphasized and prolonged by the flapping of his outstretched wings, descended into the scene of his nativity, trotted into the darkness of the coop, and was gone-- his words, rather than his appearance, being distinctive to human beings.

#

For years to come, until the second coming, the others, Niniane, her parents, Dillis, Father Angelo, Brother Silas, Bishop Serxner, the former Father Frank, May and Irene came together at Niniane's home in the state capital for a vegan feast every year on June 21<sup>st</sup>, Charlie's birthday. Thus a number of Catholic clerics, a couple of witches, a Jew, two nominal Southern Baptists and a vegan agnostic, despite their parted ways, came together every year to remember a chicken whose only real wish was never to be forgotten.

## THE FRIENDLY BEASTS

*An old carol from France*

Jesus our brother, kind and good,  
Was humbly born in a stable rude;  
The friendly beasts around Him stood,  
Jesus our brother, kind and good.

“I,” said the donkey, shaggy and brown,  
“I carried His Mother up hill and down;  
I carried her safely to Bethlehem town,  
I,” said the donkey, shaggy and brown.

“I,” said the cow, all white and red,  
“I gave Him my manger for his bed;  
I gave Him my hay to pillow His head.  
I,” said the cow, all white and red.

“I,” said the sheep with the curly horn,  
“I gave Him my wool for a blanket warm.  
He wore my coat on Christmas morn.  
I,” said the sheep with the curly horn.

“I,” said the dove from the rafters high,  
“I cooed Him to sleep so He would not cry,  
I cooed Him to sleep, my mate and I.  
I,” said the dove from the rafters high.

And every beast, *by some good spell*,  
In the stable dark was glad to tell,  
Of the gift he gave Immanuel,  
The gift he gave Immanuel.