**Chicpocalypse and the Remarkable Praline Redemption Device**

**by Jeff Tallent**

**Prologe**

Maybe I should start with the reprieve of Ferdinand the Seeing Eye Pig. It was around then that he turned evil. He was telepathic, I guess. That's how he influenced the starlings and the wild hogs into helping him with his schemes. Or maybe it was some other kind of magic. People said there must have been magic there at the Clover Creek Bend, or the late Conrad T. McGuillicutty coudn't have done all that he did.

Or maybe I should start with him. A celebrated entrepreneur an inventer was Conrad T. McGuilicutty. You've heard of the beanbammock? Conrad T. McGuillicutty invented that. Also the hypervac, the self-leveling gyro-ladder, the kayak-a-rail ab-earobic home fitness system, and the quick-release coolant reservoir and egg poacher. Those, and many other things you could buy only on TV or at stores that sell things you can only buy on tv. They were conceived and prototyped right here at his farm on Clover Creek Bend. He was a visionary and a family man. He loved his wife , who we now call Mosey, and he loved all nine of their children. Before he died he closed up his workshop, whiich was a converted barn, and devoted himself to farming. He said he wanted to create something that was lasting as well as lucrative, so he planted an orchard on that hill that overlooked the farmhouse. Hazelnuts.

Why hazelnuts?

“For a very good reason,.” he said. “You'll find out what it is when the time comes.”

He died suddenly of an aneurism.

Come to think of it, this isn't where I want to start, either. Maybe with the social worker knocking on the door of Conrad's son Buford that day not so long ago. She was holding the hand of Buford's son Wes and the look on both their faces was grim. After a while, the social worker was gone and Wes was on his bicycle pedaling as fast has his legs could back to town. He ignored the pleas coming from the pickup truck keeping pace beside him.

“Son, stop your bike and get in the truck with me!” Buford called from behind the wheel.

“Please!” chimed Molly, Buford's second wife.

“I'm going home to my mom!” said Wes. Pain had turned his face into granite.

“Son that can't happen!” said Buford.

“Please, Wes,” said Molly. “A car might come. If you don't stop this we'll have to call the police.”

“Ok son, if we have to we will. But first I'm going to try hitting you with my belt and see if that works.”

That was also a sad day. I don't want to start there, either.

There's a particular kind of smugness that makes people give worthless advice like, “just start at the beginning.” The don't say it to be helpful, they say it to be smart. I wish I did live in a world where beginnings are clearly labeled and just wait around in obvious places for people to come along and start at them. But that's not my world. In my world there aren't any way-markers or signposts. Just objectives and obstacles and we are each of of but workmen carrying large plate-glass windows through the tumult of God's bitter comedy, and what rules there are act in service to pandemonium, and specify that windows so carried be broken, and that to note a shotgun as hanging on a mantle is to commit it to be fired, and to have a dramatic effect on plate glass windows sometimes and sometimes a a kindly old nanny goat who never gave advice to anyone for any reason other than to be helpful.

But now I've gotten ahead of my story. I know this because I've now I've decided where to start. I'll start with the day Chickpocalypse came to the farm.

**I. On the Chicken Training of Dogs**

It was fine spring day on the farm. Wes McGuillicutty was puttering with on the rear deck of the farmhouse, where stood a vivarium that housed an iguana who was, for the moment, green. Attending Wes were three dogs, a cat and a kindly nanny goat. Ferdinand the Seeing Eye Pig was confined to a pen situated close enough to the deck that he could engage in the activity. The laying hens murmered softly as they plied the wooded copse behind the farmhouse for crrickets and worms and whatever it is chickens busy themselves at. An eastern box turtle stood at the edge of the deck and contemplated the ground below.

“Turtles die from falls much more often than you’d think,” said the turtle, Cerio. “So you should all stop making jokes.”

“I don’t think you should do it,” said Calla, a kindly nanny goat,who never gave anyone advice for any reason other than to be helpful. Ferdinand the pig betrayed no interest at all, but he was hopefully evaluating the chances that the turtle might take an errant bounce roll into his pen.

“I can’t go on,” said the turtle. “Unrequited love has driven me to this!’

The deck had a wood picket railing capped by a two-by-six board which in the summer accommodated drinking glasses of iced tea. A yellow cat lay there now. Her name had initially been Floyd. When she first came to the farm, Buford had declared with all certainty that only male cats are ever yellow in color, and with no further investigation into her gender, he selected her name. Later they had to make awkward adjustments.

Now, she sized up the distance between the turtle and the ground below with a studied detachment, begrudging the effort it took to look that direction. “Let him walk off if he wants to. It's not high enough to hurt him,” said Floydarina.

“I could land on my back get stuck!”

“I’d nose you over,” said Klutin a walker hound mix. “Might as well. I can't eat you.”

“We tried that time, Remember?“ asked Bangle, a young lab mix who was Klutin's best friend.

“You might roll into Ferdinand's pen, and he could eat you,” said Calla.

“Whatever you do,” said Wes, “I'm not going to put you in the cage with Velma. She doesn't want you there.”

“No, I don't!” confirmed the iguanana.

“But I love you!” declared the turtle, not for the first time.

“Puh-lease! We're not even the same species.”

“Love is transcendent. We will bring to this world offspring of hybrid vigor! They will make it a better place. Let me come into your cage with you. I will feed you meal worms and crickets. I will bring you tasty fungus an lichens from the forest, even if I have to enter the Silas Marsh to get them!”

Velma turned ash grey. “You can't go into Silas Marsh!” she gasped.

The Silas Marsh was at the edge of the pasture and the forest. It had once been a pond and Mosey remembered fishing in it when she was a girl. It had silted over the years and the woods had grown up around it. It had served as a watering hole for raccoons and coyotes and wild hogs. But something changed in the years. The marsh went silent at night as the bullfrogs stopped croaking. The coyotes and raccoons abondoned it and only a few wild hogs dared to set foot near it.

“It's haunted!” said Calla.

“I'm going to put you somewhere you'll be safe,” he said to Cerio. “Then I'm going inside.”

Bofore studied the air with his nose.

“Your dad’s coming,” he said. “He’s bringing a chicken.

“A chicken?” asked Wes.

“Yes, a live chicken.”

Bofore conjured with his nose the shape of Buford and the chicken. Buford wore a smile vanilla. He cradled the chicken in his arms. The chicken bore an aura of porcupine and lilies, of loss and fear. The chicken had barbed its feathers defensively but Buford didn’t notice.

Buford wasn’t really cradling the chicken. Not yet, anyway. He was driving his truck down the long driveway to the farm. And the chicken hadn’t really barbed its feathers. It was cowering in in the passenger’s side floorboard. The barbs and the cradling were were representations Bofore conjured in the air. Spores, dogs called them.

As you know, dogs have very keen noses. But you can’t think of a dog’s nose as a more capable version of your own. Dogs have magic in their noses. A dogs nose doesn’t merely sample the air, it gives form to it.

Bufford's truck clattered down the driveway. It was mostly whiteish in color though the passenger-side door and the tailgate were from a brown donor vehicle . The rattle came from a loose muffler, which hung rom the spare tire mount where it was suspended by bailing wire. The truck came to a rest at its usual spot, covering an oil slick formed by a leak which had been made worse by Buford's effort at a seal job. The parking area was at the center of a triangle formed by the farmhouse, the barn, and Praline Cottage, which was a nickname given in sarcasm to the unkempt guiesthouse occupied by Mosey. This area functioned as parking lot and courtyard center stage on which many of the dramas of Clover Creek Bend played out.

Bufford emerged from the truck. Tucked in the crook of his arm was a black and white speckled chicken. She was striking in appearance. Buford smiled at Wes.

“She's a silver spangled Homberg hen.” he volunteered.

Wes barely looked at it.

“Big deal,” he said.

“I brought her to live on the farm,” he continued. “She belonged to Hoyle Perkins. You remember him? We saw him at the swimming pool that time. He was riddin' his bicycle, and he had that wiener dog and this chicken in the basket. He always traveled that way. I've seen Hoyle in the grocery store and this chicken and that dog just sitting in the basket wating for him. Don't know how he trained 'em.”

“Dad, what do you want?” Wes asked, cutting him off.

Buford thought for a bit.

“Appreciation. I guess I want appreciation. I didn't bring this chicken home for myself. I thought you'd like her. And you would, too, if it was anybody brought her to you besides me.”

“What I don’t understand,” said Bofore, the aged Labradoodle mix, “Is how a turtle can ever die from a fall?”

“Chicken hawk,” suggested Floydarina. “They could sweep a turtle high up in the air, then bust it wide open on the rocks below.”

“How awful,” said Calla.

“And respect,” continued Buford. “Boys are supposed to respect their daddies, and plenty still do.”

“Chicken hawks,” agreed Cerio. “That's very common. And lots of other ways too. Being shot out of a cannon, for instance.”

“Shot out of a Cannon?” Floydarina inquired.

“Ok, maybe that's rare,” said Cerio. “But it's very common for turtles to…, to...”

“When I was your age, folks just took for granted that boys respected their dad. Things were better back then in more ways than you can count.”

“You can walk off a cliff!” said Wes.

“Wes!” said Buford. “That's it. You can get to your room!”

“But, dad, wait ...”

No, boy, I'm not waiting! You march yourself straight to your room.

“Ok, ok. First I'm going to go get that turtle.”

Buford allowed the chicken to flutter from his hand and fixed a resolute stare on Wes. “Son, if you take a step and it's not toward your room, I'm going to take my belt to you. And if I don't, you don't have to believe a word I say to you ever again.”

Was looked toward the turtle and then toward his dad. “I hate you”, he said, and sobbing, he ran to his room.

Buford sighed and dropped his head. He stepped to the railing and watched the chickens in the courtyard. The laying hens were now scrutinizing the newcomer. Buford bent over the railing and rested himself against it, propping himself on strong, tanned arms.

“What is Hoyl Perkins' chicken doing on this farm?” came an old woman's voice from the Praline Cottage. Mosey had stepped out on her porch.

“Hoyl's gone to a nursing home. “They let him keep that weiner dog of his but not the chicken.”

“Did you remember my groceries?” Mosey asked.

Buford had. A few minutes later he was in the kitchen of the Praline Cottage looking for a place to put them. He knew there wouldn't be room in her cupboards, because these were permanently occupied by the non-perishables Mosey had accumulated over the years but would never eat. Pumpkin pie filling, mandarine oranges, canned lentils and the like. Counters also were filled to capacity. Indeed, free surface area of any sort was difficult to find in Mosey's house. Mosey was a consumate bargain hunter, and one with considerable means. This combination made made clutter difficult to avoid.

To make matters worse, she was the mother of nine children, and therefore the recipient of 18 obligitory gifts each year. As the years passed, her living area came to be overwhelmed by a bounty of nik naks, keepsakes, gegaws and objects des art, none of it of any significant value, except perhaps her late husband Conrad's shootgun, which hung over the mantel.

Buford took a seat that allowed him a view of the courtyard through the entry door, which was mostly glass panes.

“I don't think I like the way those dogs are looking at those chickens,” said Buford.”This might be the day I have to chicken train them.

“Well, the chickens have been here since last fall, and the dogs haven't bothered them,” said Mosey.

“Dogs have a predator's heart,” said Buford. “Without a proper chicken training, it's just a matter of time until they give themselves over to it.”

Buford had gone on and on about chicken training since the laying hens arrived at the farm as chicks. To Mosey's certain knowledge, Buford had never trained a dog not to chase chickens but that didn't stop him from claiming authority on the subject. The method he prescribed had, no doubt, been recounted to him somebody whose purpose had been to inspire indignation.

Mosey could not resist an opportunity to become indignant, so she encouraged him.

“Chicken training?” she asked. “How do you do that.”

“When your dog chases a chicken, the correct thing to do is to let the dog to catch that chicken and kill it. Now, the chicken does have to be dead and that is not negotiable. In most dog-chicken encounters, the chicken will demise of natural causes. However, if the matter is at doubt for any reason, the trainer may augment the dog's effort through the use firearms.“

“Shoot the chicken?” asked Mosey, as if hearing this for the first time.

“Shoot the chicken,” Buford confirmed.

“Once secured, you use the chicken itself to apply correcttive action against the offending dog.”

“You beat the stuffing out of him, with the chicken. Then keep on a beating. Don't worry if the head comes off the chicken. It's supposed to do that. If by the time you're finished the head is still attached to the rest of the chicken then you haven't done a bit of good. You'll have to do the whole thing over.”

“That boy is going have scars.” said Mosey.

“It's not a pleasant thing to witness, but it don't hurt the dog none,” Buford assured her. “And it really ain't that bad for the chicken. There's Asian cultures where chickens tenderized in that exact manner are prized as a delicacy.”

Mosey returned to shffling though some shopping bags at her feet. Pete’s Pennywise was having its going out of business sale – the third one this year. Prices were discounted to levels that obligated Mosey fortify herself against future shortages of corn syrup and cinnamon scented pine cones. These she would maroon in Conrad's old barn along with the other things she had acquired. Mosey owned thirty-seven headboards, size full. She had and an equal number of footboards but not one matched set.

These were in the barn stacked flatwise on top of each other. They formed a tower which swayed a bit when Floydarina climbed it, but it had never fallen. From the top, she cold look down on particle board shelving that sagged under the weight of wallpaper that was decades out of date, glue and rusting cans of spray paint.

“Does it have to be a chicken?” Mosey asked. “What about a newspaper?”

“Only if newspapers are what your trying to get your dog to stop chasing,” answered Buford.

“What about a rubber chicken? I've got a box of them somewhere. Party Palace had a closeout.”

A commotion outside cut off Buford's answer. Barking, snarling squaking. Wes was shouting from the open window of his room.

“Bad dogs! Klutin! Bangle! No!”

But it was Klutin and Bangle yes! They were, indeed, given over to their predator hearts, and they chased after the new hen with relish and abandon.

Klutiin howled and called and snapped at the chicken's tailfeathers as she disappeard beneath Bufford's truck. He wriggled in behind her, his tail disappearing under the truck just as the chicken emerged out the other side. Bangle rounded the truck and was closing the distance on her as they both disappeared into the barn.

From the barn, siilence. A diturbming hollow metalic thumping came from beneath the truck, along with the quiet whimpering of the dog.. Wes rushed to the truck to render aid.

Then a long, omnious wooden creak from the barn caught Wes's ear. Even the dog under the truck fell silent. The creak was followed by concussive crash that shook the ground beneath Wes's feet. A tower of headboards and footboard more than 70 high had toppled over onto the particle board shelving. Witnesses would later claim that the entire barn lifted a foot off the ground then settled back down on its foundation. Rusty cans of spray paint hissed and exploded.

Out the door came a silver spangled blur. Close at heal was Bangle, now multicolored with dripping paint, and trailing a long streamer of floral patterned wallpaper of mauve and seafoam green. Grease-smattered, Klutin extracted himself from the undercarriage of Buford's truck and joined the chase. He had become entangled in the baling wire that supported the muffler and was now dragging the wire and the muffler behind him.

Buford emerged from the house, shotgun in hand. He fired in the air but neglected to exit the porch first. Bits of the ceiling landed on his head.

The hen's churning legs carried her up the steps to the deck, across the length of it, and down the steps at the other end. These lead the porch of the Praline Cottage, disrupting a skirmish between Mosey and Buford over control of the shotgun. Klutin and Bangle followed. Bangle left metallic blue footprints across the deck. The muffler swept back and forth behind Klutin, knocking over lawn chairs and the iguana's vivarium.

Calla the goat, always looking for a way to be of help, joined the chase. So did Cerio the turtle, although you wouldn’t have been able to tell. The dogs and the goat bowled over Mosey and Buford as they disappeared into the Praline Cottage. Mosey followed, and then Buford, still holding the gun.

Inside the Praline Cottage, china cabinets fell. Pantry shelves gave way. Two more shotgun blasts. A plaintive bleating. Two dogs emerged from the Praline Cottage, but no goat. Klutin and Bangle, festooned with cinnamon-scented pine cones, ran tails tucked and wailing in different directions.

The Praline Cottage was silent except for the settling of debris and the soft creaking of an overhead light fixture swinging from its wiring.. The laying hens mumured softly.

Tennyson Jack and Elmer exited the Prailine Cottage, climbed the steps to the deck. Tennyson Jack slumped into a chair at the inron-mesh patio table. Elmer righted the vivarium and joined him.

“Did you see where the dogs went?” asked Tennyson Jack.

“Bangle went up the hill through the orhard. Klutin looked like he was headed for Silas Marsh.”

The soft vocalizations of the laying hens swelled briefly into an anxious murmuring crescendo, then softened again.

“They'll come back soon enough,” said Tennyson back. “Hopefully, they'll be the better for the experience.”

“I guess this was their aversion training,” said Elmer.

The silver spangled hamburg fluttered out a broken window of the Prailine Cottage. She joined the laying hens

“She is a strking bird,” said Tennyson Jack. “I wonder what Wes will name her?”

**Chapter II: Chickpocolypse**

The event became known as the Ultimate Silver Spangled Death Derby of Clover Creek Bend, although a while later, the name was changed to the Penultimate Silver Spangled Death Derby of Clover Creek Bend and still later to the First Silver Spangled Death Derby of Clover Creek Ridge. No event that followed held more consequence to the family order. Questions were raised that never received a satisfactory answer. Indictments and recriminations lingered for years and ruined many a Thanksgiving meal. No two accounts of it were the same but one thing was agreed upon by all.

It was time to clean out that barn.