I Had a Farm

Inspired by Mike Resnick's "Old MacDonald Had A Farm"

I still have this memory, back when I was just a few years old. In the middle of April when snow started to melt, men of the tribe brought to camps huge animals tied upside-down by their legs on a stick. A while later cheekbones and jawbones were grinded by a hollow log, and people danced by its sound. The uncles stood in a line facing the East, and the aunties walked to the men they chose, and stood facing them and the West. The aunties made the first move and the uncles moved parallel to the aunties' dance steps. Mother told me that it is a Spring dance. Legend says that in one Spring, a pair of brothers danced with a she bear, and one of the men turned into a bear. The grinding of jawbones and chinbones against a log replicates the growl of the she bear; and the dance is for honoring and celebrating Spring. After the adults danced, the meat of the jawbones' owner was served, simmered with chili. Each received their portion of brownish cubes sprayed with similarly coloured red chilies. Each bite out of the steak was firm, dense, and flowing juice of a livestock. Once the chilling spiciness was gone, the wild addictive odor of meat stayed for minutes. We ate our meat outside the tent, like we always did. Under the ginormous yellowish mountains, which mother said that those were sleeping Ute warriors, lying in the mountain the earth creator built for him when he died.

My name is Caesar Claudius MacDonald. The year is 2040, the year where meat is missing. Ten years ago, a rise of global temperature caused all the ice of the poles to melt, five years earlier than experts predicted. More water flowed into the sea and the ocean now became less salty. That affected the thermohaline circulation, the ocean now flows faster than before. The speedy ocean current causes more extreme weather. Whenever humans grow crops, they are all destroyed by typhoons or storms once it is Summer. Farmers either give up fields, or harvest before the crops are ready to be reaped. Every vegetable you can find in stock is grown in advanced greenhouses built with wind-proof walls, automatic irrigation and air conditioners. Yet it is not enough to feed 11 billion people, let alone the farm animals we used to eat. Hence, food has been incrementally expensive due to the lack of supply. The only meat you can get, real meat like chicken, pork and beef, is at least ten thousand dollars per pound stored in millionaires' underground freezers. Even diners with an aquatic taste cannot escape the meat shortage since the Pacific Garbage Patch now as big as Europe is poisoning seafood of all sorts. This is an era, without meat. Unless...

“Oh Grace, you are still here?” My project assistant Grace Merce is in the underground laboratory. Say that it is a laboratory, it is actually an enclosed area to keep some of my study outcome. “A typhoon number 12 is coming, I think I better let you go early.”

“Oh hi Caesar,” my assistant greets me. Publicly I am addressed as Professor MacDonald. But I don’t want to be associated with some cheap fast food chain brand. So, among my colleagues and friends, I’d like to be addressed by my first name. “I want to finish this report first”. She is recording the status in the form she is holding. In front of her are barns of protein balls, medium sized animals as the outcome of my fifth PHD in Genetics several years ago. Despite looking exactly like pigs, they are not. They have the base DNA of a pig, and a mix of other genes (can’t tell you which animal is mixed, it’s confidential). For the past decades, I have been manipulating DNA chains, breeding embryos in test tubes, and growing each individual DNA combination in separated cells. This large room which used to be the university’s badminton court is grouped with lines of cells. Each cell is around 9 feet long and 9 feet wide, contained inside is one or a pair of or multiple protein balls. It’s just like keeping lab rats in a honeycomb of containers. Once the protein balls grow from embryos to infants, they are placed together with some matured protein balls and get nourished until they are old enough to feed on hay. This is one advantage of modifying existing DNA chains, your animals can, at least theoretically speaking, reproduce and sustain the species. This batch of protein balls in particular, are earlier batches experimented to shorten the life cycle. Each month, their weight and general health condition is recorded. She and the workers are already on the third cell.

“Batch 172, sample 3...220 pounds, 1.2 meters tall, high body temperature. Poor thing”. She moves to the next cell, “batch 172, sample 4... dead. Oh God. Batch 172 sample 5...400 pounds. 400 pounds? [the workers nod.] Wow, 400 pounds. Let’s see, healthy.”

“You know Grace, typhoon 12 is lethal, it can easily lift a human. We can do this tomorrow. At least free these workers. Or maybe I...Oh Cotter, I thought you were away.”

My business assistant Judson Cotter, dressed in his top-notch suit and gelling his hair, is standing by the entrance holding his briefcase, “I was, Mr MacDonald. But someone called right before I planned to leave. Professor Dawn Wong is inviting you to a conference. Shall I get your reply sir?”

“What kinda conference is that?” asks Grace.

“Science and ecology studies, Next Monday 8pm.”

“Thanks Cotter. Please tell him I will be joining. And Grace...”
Miss Merce turns to the workers and says, “you two can go first,” and she grabs the handle of the mobile scale, “I can finish this report myself.” And she grabs a tuft of green grass (they are rare these days) for luring the animals onto the scale.

“Welcome all, to our biosemiotics conference!” Professor Dawn Wong is standing on the stage in the lecture theatre, facing upward at us to start his speech. This old man’s speech is quite unique, speaking a chunk of several

words at a time, and ends the chunk with a rising tone. I wonder how his students survive his speech. “Today, we are glad, to have experts from all over the world! We have biologists! We have geneticist! We have geologists! We have en-va-men-tal-list! It is dif-fi-cult, to come up with a theme to please you all. But back when I was the department head of a university, I have always been proud of, my approach of in-ter-dis-ci-pin-nar-rity! One idea connecting many fields, is the idea of ecology. Cultural Studies has been com-plaining about the hierarchical ideology of men and the others. Men and women for gender studies, white men and other races for ethnicity studies. But beyond that, Cultural Studies also introduces the nonhumans! The other beings we traditionally do not consider as...um...consicous, sapient, and excluded in many research interests! For example, plants and animals. They don’t talk! Yet I know many pro-fess-ion-als here would agree that they have their own way of expression. The surroundings of a being is exclusive to that being, giving environmental pressure, forcing animals and plants to make changes, in order to survi~ve. Living beings adapting to their subjective environment, is their features! Like animals growing camouflage or plants growing different kinds of leaves. These are biology, the physical features of a being. That is the ‘bio’ in biosemiotics. Semiotics, the other half, is what humans perceive from the bio, and make sense of it, signify out of it, and make cultural texts out of it. By focusing on how animals and plants, sometimes landscapes are having their expressions, as well as in-ter-connecting with each other, we are studying

nonhumans in a collaboration of both science and ecology. And in the end, we think difference, differently!" The sound of clapping roars in the lecture hall. Professor Wong then continues his introduction, "today, we are glad to have experts from our fields of language arts, to share studies with you. We have Professor Amanda Chan to share with you 'The Deleuzian She Beast: Perspective of Technoscience and Nature in Events'. Professor Jose Lam to present the linguistic aspect in 'Animals Becoming Symbols: Chinese Logograph, Chinese Myths, and Biosemiotics in The Classic of Mountains and Seas'. And many more. But first, let's have Doctor Timothy Lam here to share his paper 'Adapt, Survive, and Overcome: The Biosemiotics of Humans in The Claws of Man'. Tim is also an expert in biosemiotics! The stage is yours Tim." A young chubby man with slightly curly black hair walks to the stage and opens his PowerPoint.

"Well Professor Wong, your ability of over-exaggerating people's skills has greatly improved! I am no expert here, I am just a simple scholar trying to write my way in the academic world. Also you have already explained biosemiotics, so what am I going to say here? [Laughs.] I still have to go through the literature review anyway. I better do this quickly since I will also be presenting my another paper 'Plants Have Hearts: Intersecting Biosemiotics, Translation Studies and Chinese Poem" after this. First of all, one shall be reminded that biosemiotics is a large field like Cultural Studies, a general term covering

various concepts and there is no universifying way of studying it. Just take Wendy Wheeler's quote, it is bio and semiotics, biology and signs. In this case, biosemiotics intersects both science and humanities, talking about biological features that we can treat as symbols with a meaning. On the biology side, it has been quite well-established that animals can adapt. The surroundings of each species is different and these are subjective environments, basically just what lifeforms can perceive from what's around them. This forms environmental pressure forcing animals to adapt, developing explicit or subtle features that humans can observe, with the naked eye or through microscope. It is under that specific environment, life of all sorts Adapt, Survive, and Overcome. Yes, just like the Bear Grylls meme here. If this sounds familiar to you, it bears similarity to evolution. Basically they work the same, it IS evolution, but without the one species completely turning into another species nonsense. Anyway, these analyses over biological features usually seen in science conferences can also be applied to humanities when such biological features are treated as signs. I'll give you one brief example. Who's not afraid of the cold and wishes to fly to a warm place? Not the geese. The living surroundings become cold and uninhabitable is an environmental pressure. Most animals would either develop freeze-resistance furs and fat, or they hibernate. That is their biosemiotics. Geese on the other hand, fly south for a warm climate. That, is their biosemiotics. Chinese in their foreign land see this pneumonia, and for some reason wish that they can fly back to their hometown like these geese. Therefore

the image of flying geese has always been linked with homesickness in Tong Poems. This has always been what Cultural Studies is about! Signs and signification. We humans always have more abstract concepts such as perhaps homesick, that is the idea we need to signify. Geese flying to the other side of the sky is their biological feature, and this more solid scene can be used to signify such an abstract concept. The geese are the signifier, in the signification of homesickness. And that's one way of biosemiotics. Okay, now that I have leaked my next presentation we better move on to our cultural text. Slight sum up here, lifeforms adapt, survive and overcome the environment is bio, and humans making sense out of it is semiotics."

"Now, moving on to our movie The Claws of Men. It just premiered last week, so, spoiler alert, my niece slept through the movie. I have no idea why, it is full of breathtaking, dynamic scenes. Just, don't bring kids to the theatre. Anyway, back to the film. This film is set in the hazardous world of 2299, where very few plants and animals live. Think of it as the Mad Max dusty dessert. Humans in that film confront earthquakes, floods, pests, wildfires, storms, hurricanes, one disaster after another. Basically it is Earth hosting hunger games. The story follows the protagonist Eugene MacGother, originally a zookeeper, as a scientist who proposes to insert animal genes to survive the world. With no one willing to join him he does experiments on himself. At each disaster Eugene observes animals in the environment, manages to capture one

and inject their DNA into himself. In the end, he finds human survivor camp uncomfortable for himself and decides to venture into the wild. Many movie reviews have already commented on dystopia and climate change. I, on the other hand, am going to talk about biosemiotics, the one prominent focus of which I am actually surprised that no one is talking about. In each case, Eugene observes the animals and those end up being part of his genes. He studies whales and inserts their DNA to help himself to withstand the waterflow and more importantly breathe in the flood as an underwater mammal. He observes camels and their long eyebrows to survive a sandstorm. He looks at birds and wonders why aren't they blown away in the typhoon, and knows that they have strong claws to grab on trees. Details please read my paper where I analyze the symbol and significance of each gene he adds. The thing is, he is making use of the already adapted animals as part of his genes, therefore surviving this world. Biosemiotics has always been how animals adapt, survive and overcome. Now think about it, if altering biological features to survive is lifeform's biosemiotics, then technology is humans' biosemiotics, and Eugene's weapon of choice is genetics. Just to state a fact, humans are biologically the worst surviving animal. We don't have sharp teeth and claws, our skin is too fragile and our limbs are too delicate to live in the world. What we do most in order to survive is our technology. We sew clothes to keep ourselves warm. We farm to keep ourselves fed. We build houses to keep ourselves safe. This, in some sense, is the biological feature of us, our intelligence. In fact, 'Eu' in some languages

means ‘good’, and Eugene means good genes. In my opinion, with the genes of already adapted animals, Eugene has discovered the best technology. This is the revelation, we humans have been developing our technology, yet nature has already given us what we need. Another must-mention idea is the concept of Becoming-Animal. Whatever we say becoming-something, humans are turning into what we culturally view as inferior. That is the hierarchy between men and women, white and other, humans and nonhumans. This is the hierarchy every responsible human shall hate. Recognize one repeated scene is that despite Eugene’s successful survival tactics using his animal genes, he never gets along well with the humans. Children despise him, women gossip behind him, men don't trust him. In the end, he leaves the survivors camp. Last five minutes of the movie is exceedingly dazzling and unknown. It is a montage of peculiar scenes and sounds, yet so serene. In my view, that might be how adapted animals see the world, which is so different from us humans. The story of Eugene inspires us that other-than-human species can be more well-adapted than humans. That might renew how we view the human, technology, nature triangular relationship. And with biosemiotics focusing more on animals, we might get a better understanding of the nonhumans from the scope of science and humans combined. In the end, we think difference, differently.”

“So,” he clicks to the next page, “before I end this presentation, is there any question you may want to ask or some issue you wish to discuss? I know we have many experts in science, so...Yes!”

“If biosemiotics is like what you suggest,” an old woman in white robe asks, “living beings develop biological features to adapt to their environment, why do species still extinct like in the film and in real life? They should have been well-adapted already!”

“That is a really practical question doctor,” he responds, “now I am not a scientist, I am just a scholar, yet even I can see the rapid drop of a species. It is well-established here that lifeforms can adapt and evolve, but it is slow for their genes to make enough changes for survival. It takes decades and even a millia for a species to reach what we are saying in biosemiotics. The thing is, at least in the movie, humans has done way too much damage to the Earth in a really short time. The climate changes before animals can adapt. This movie to me is not just a dystopian film, but also a warning of what the world could possibly be happening, which is not really far from the truth. Another question?”

His claim of humans taking genes of another kind has intrigued me, so I raise my hand. “Eugene takes the gene of already adapted beings to survive. What if I take already adapted genes into another lifeform and create life capable of surviving the world? Can I have a strong species?”

He gasps in excitement, and screeches at the top of his voice, “Yes! That’s how the movie: *Claws of Men* demonstrates it. That might be how biosemiotics,

a Cultural Studies concept focusing on other-than-human species intersect with science and inspires genetics. If even humans can survive that, I can't see why other animals can't." He then pulls a stern face. "But in reality that would be problematic. Now that Eugene is possibly the strongest being nature has ever seen, if his DNA can be reserved, such a new species would overpopulate, storm the local area, and threaten the already fragile ecosystem. Unless that is what you are looking for, I don't recommend it."

Seeing no one raises questions, he moves on to his conclusion. As he breathes in for a long talk, the music Arrival of the Queen of Sheba sounds. Obviously it is his style of using BGM for his conclusions. That is a surprise for sure. But I cannot quite focus on what he has said, or his presentation that follows. I am having other thoughts. Why haven't I thought of that before? I have been trying to recreate farm animals, and I somehow succeed like Eugene. Why am I still staying in my laboratory? Overpopulate and take over the world? Sounds like what meat animals shall be! I don't want to experiment on animals in a lab anymore. I want to go big, I want my animal to be mass produced!

I am Caesar MacDonald, I want to have a farm.

In between the speed of walking and running, I return to my office in the University. It is just a room above the laboratory. When I dash into the room,

Grace is not here, Cotter is nowhere to be found. Cotter is a bit unpredictable when it comes to his whereabouts. Grace however... I head to the lift hall. During working hours, when she does not need to assist me in my undergraduate classes, or entering data into her holopad, she would only be in one place. I open the wooden door of my lab. She is leaning towards a cell, holding some hay. I walk closer, she is fishing some young protein balls with the hay, which are crowded by the wall attempting to take a bite.

"Grace, where is the latest report?"

"I have uploaded one last week," her gaze never moves from the protein balls.

"Which batch is this cell?"

"Batch 161 sample 19, second generation. What's with them?"

"Just, can these be mass produced yet?"

"We need to observe at least 3 generations."

"How about batch 172, we have shortened their lifecycle, can they be mass produced?"

"It takes 2 years for a generation, they are not ready. Also we don't have that much space to contain that many generations." The university gives us two underground floors to store our animals. Which is already generous when many still can't afford a bedspace.

“We don ‘ave enough unding too,” Cotter suddenly appears behind us, holding his nose with a delicate handkerchief. He addresses Grace, “you don ‘ave to be ice to them, they are orn as meat anyway.

“Why don’t you talk outside, Cotter,” Grace responds to him dryly.

“Ood idea, Mr MaDonald. Less talk ouuside.”

“Cotter, what do you think?” I say to him when we move out of the area, “brought to you by Old MacDonald’s Farm, the brand new protein ball!”

He breathes, “it sounds like cheap man-made food. Also, what do you mean farm Mr MacDonald? We are already running out of fund.”

“How about butterballs, same name as my first artificial meat? That sounds more delicious than protein balls.”

“I said, Mr MacDonald, We are running out of fund.”

“What do you mean we are running out of fund? We should have gotten plenty from our sponsors and the University.”

“Not when you constantly feed them with crops and hay. These plants are scarce these days. Many people are just feeding on dried crops. You may not realise, protein balls are literally eating cash.”

He surely talks more than that, but I am thinking about other things. Feed them with scarce crops is a waste? Meat animals shall not be fed the same food with humans, our food shall not compete for our food! That’s it, I need to go back to the drawing board, and think of sustainable food sources before thinking about a farm.

I need a day off, and travel to the South part of the country. My wife Edith Glutto has a house there. Well, she had a house. It is a little wooden hut, where we spent most of our holidays together before she passed away. She died of cancer, and lack of nutritious food for recovery. Shame! I was doing my third PHD and missed my goodbye. What she left is this house. I lay on an armchair, looking at a field of light brown near the green shining coastline. Oh Edith, my project is in danger. How I missed your cold gentle hands on my shoulder. Do you remember the times when I spent everything on my research and we had to feed on your prototypes? The pills you invented were the Cal Surge, a concentration of energy and calories intended to feed the population. Cal Surge? Feed? Why haven't I thought of this before? Her pills are entirely artificial and can be an alternative animal feed. Problem solved! But I have run out of funding. I take out my bank record book. I have plenty left by my family and my wife's family. Might be good enough to buy animal feed and land.

I am Caesar MacDonald. I will have a farm.

With the help of my colleague Albert Epoch, I managed to perfect my wife's recipe for Cal Surge, a golden pallet with high calories stored, a handful of these can feed a man full. Edith had planned to solve starvation with this pallet. Yet she hadn't got the gut to maximize the energy in it, fearing that

humans may refuse to take pills as the main source of food. Now that we are just going to feed animals, that is not our concern. As a debt he owes me years ago when developing his own Living AI, Albert happily agrees to supply me a good amount of these to support my project.

“Caesar, I still don’t understand, you are just using these to feed animals, but not humans?” he asks when he passes me the first bag of animal feed.

“You know I am going to put them into good use.”

“Yeah right. Perhaps you should take some reference from my Living AI which can be fed on electricity. Afterall, you are the one I shall thank for developing a flesh and machine interface.”

“But Albert, not everyone is like...like...I always forgot your first successful creation.”

“Alex McSheen. Well, he is just a modern Frankenstein where I literally revived my dead nephew. That was, 13 years ago and he lives well. I am expecting a grandchild from a human-machine hybrid you know.”

“Well, watching our own living creation having the next generation is strange. Believe me, I have been there. One of my batches already had a fourth generation. It’s like, being God.”

“It’s a bit different Caesar, mine is someone I know and care about. Yours are animals dedicated to meat production. No offense. Oh, that reminds me, are you going to use these pallets on your animals, the protein balls?”

“I plan to rename them as butterballs. To others I won’t tell much. But just for you Alb, I urgently need these. What if I tell you I want to mass produce the butterballs, and need a sustainable feed for hundreds and even thousands of butterballs.”

“You mean to build a farm?”

“Yes, a farm!”

“A farm is complicated, Caesar, you need to have land, enough workers, and a reliable food source. Bet you cannot do that.”

“What if I succeed? Bet?”

“I will buy 1% of your first stock.”

“You’re going to anyway.”

It has been a month since we have been feeding protein balls with the Cal Surge. I open the lab door, running to Grace to hear for progress. When I reach the entrance of the lab, Grace happens to be leaving. She looks pale, really pale, I have never seen anyone so lifeless. She raises her head to look at me, says nothing, and slams a file on my chest. I know better than to ask her. I dash into the laboratory, and instantly know why. The first two lines of cells on the left, with earlier batches of protein balls, lying dead on the ground, some breathing softly, all motionless. The cells on the right aren't as good. At the furthest right of the cells, only batch 178 is healthy and well. All of the protein balls are idle, with occasionally one or two more energetic ones crawl to the gate and oink.

They are thin, not really boney thin, but it is hard to convince one that these are the round meaty protein balls you see a few weeks earlier. I open the gate of the cell, and start inspecting the habitat. It doesn't take long to know why. The usually brown, smelly, wet feces are not smelly at all. Rather, they look like Cal Surge pallets stick together with light brown glue, reminds me of natto. It is all clear then. Regardless of what we feed them, they cannot digest all. I read the report, this is what Grace writes, "fail to digest all the food we feed".

"Why such a fuss on that," Cotter is at the door when I leave the lab, "they are going to die one day anyway. Why care so much about things that would eventually die or be eaten." Clearly he has seen Grace's pale face.

"Judson, most of them died." He seems to shiver a bit when I address him by his first name.

"Mr MacDonald," in a stern voice he says, "some of them live, and that means it is not a total failure. I do suggest to perfect on the remaining samples."

"They are animals. My animals!"

"Of which are bred to be served on the dining table. In that case those that died are not failures, we are just excluding ways of not succeeding."

"You are not here to argue about the value of life right? What's in that file?"

"You are right Mr MacDonald. This is a letter from 'Scope In', inviting you to an interview regarding the butterballs."

"The butterballs?"

“That’s what you name them in your latest blog. They have also sent us a list of questions they will be asking. Shall I draft you some answers?”

“No Cotter, I will just answer on will.”

In order to attend the interview, we will have to drive 6 hours from the suburban area where the university is located, to the city centre. Having met the host slash director Meander Lee of that programme, the crews set up for a broadcast. As everything is set, Ms Lee in her host seat waits for the previous programme to end. And she signals the crew to start in five, four, three, two, one, and...

“Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to ‘Scope In’, where we take a closer look at current issues. I am your host Meander Lee. Meat, a long lost legend missing from the world since God knows when. Things might change with scientists looking for ways to bring mankind’s favourite protein back to the dining table. Recently, a blog post about mass producing meat again caught the public’s attention. Today, we are glad to have the owner of the blog with us, Professor Caesar Claudius MacDonald. Welcome, professor.”

“It’s a pleasure to be here.”

“So, Professor MacDonald, just for people who don't know what is happening yet, can you tell us more about mass producing meat?”

“Please Meander, just call me Caesar. When I wrote ‘mass producing meat’, I am talking about farming animals for human consumption. Sounds

ordinary several decades ago. But not for our world. See Meander, we are living in a hazardous world. The icebergs have melted,
the temperature is rising, extreme weather is more frequent than ever. Food production alone, is close to impossible. Traditional farms have been dwindling due to the fact that their animals die of insufficient crops or unable to fully-grow before extreme weather kills them. That is unless we develop lifeforms that are quickly grown and easily fed. That is what I, a geneticist, has been doing, to create an animal capable of being mass produced in our era. We are bringing meat back to the table, and we need to genetically modify an animal in order to do that."

"I see. But Caesar, such an accomplishment of creating a new kind of creature sounds impossible. Now that you are the expert here, having obtained several PHDs in Genetics, can you briefly explain how DNA manipulation works?"

"I know it sounds mad science, but it is not. If you want to understand genetics, you'll first need to understand nature. Lifeforms would slowly adapt to the environment. Generations after generations, animals pick the strongest to reproduce and pass on their more adapted genes. Eventually, the strongest survive the harsh environment. Let me give you an example. Cactus, one of the only plants we have, can adapt to hot climates. The ones with waterlocking stems and spine-like leaves survive the climate and thrive in the Amazon Desert. It is also worth mentioning that the same happens to humans. There is

one hypothesis that we not only look like our parents, the DNA of our parents also determines our personality and behaviours. Some psychologists even believe that 50% of our personality traits are passed down by our mum and dad."

"Well, that's kind of true," Meander comments, "my kids are oftentimes as annoying as my husband. [laughs.]"

"Now apply that to DNA manipulation. Since it is established that the features of an animal adapting to the environment can be passed down through their chromosomes, we can make use of that. By exerting the desirable traits of the DNA chain and combining it with another one, we have our suitable animal."

"Make sense. But DNA is sophisticated, how do you know which part of the gene we shall take for the desired feature?"

"Good question Meander. That means we need experiments. My approach is that, by taking the embryos of existing animals, or in this case existed animals, and genetically modifying them with various combinations, we have our desired beast. That way not only we are creating an animal, but a sustainable new species. I theorized this concept back when I graduated from bachelor degree, and now my animals grow denser meat, mature in two years, and withstand climates hot and cold. That took me three plus decades and hundreds of attempts."

“It is quite astonishing, Caesar, that it works. There is one thing I am curious about. If meat is what you want, why don’t just create artificial meat? That way we can still get proteins without the need of breeding and killing creatures.”

“Sounds too idealistic, Meander, but feasible. In fact, my second generation of meat named protein balls were artificial meat. However, no matter how meat-like they are, they are plants. Soybean to be exact. You see, energy and nutrients which humans need cannot be simply replicated in a laboratory. Meat-growing shall be a complicated biological process with livestocks digesting food to accumulate the fats and proteins that men need. The necessary nutrients exclusive to meat can never be replaced with plants. Artificial meat is simply not as good as naturally grown ones. Also they don’t taste as good as real meat too. That is why we stopped experimenting on artificial meat. But the name of protein balls lives on to be our animals. And the latest batch I have been proposing is called butterballs.”

“Speaking of butterballs, I am quite in doubt that they are new. I remember back when I was a uni student, butterball nuggets were the most popular midnight snack. They were the most sought-after meat. That happened for a year or two then they suddenly disappeared. Strange.”

“Your memories are correct. In fact, that was the first generation of butterballs I introduced long ago. It was the product of my first PHD trying to revive pigs. But it did not go well. We only cloned the beast based on a single

DNA, and eventually the DNA thinned out and when one batch dies, it is forever gone. So we closed it. That is also why later generations were created from embryos, so that their bloodline continues and sustains till the Earth's end."

"Oh, so one day I might just buy meat again like 10 years ago."

"Yes you may, when my latest generation succeeds."

"When we are at it, why don't you tell us more about your next batch of butterballs."

"My team and I have been researching on the best livestock. The goal is to provide food to nourish the vastly-growing population. We need an animal that can quickly mature and be processed for food, as well as to avoid the situation of a storm or a heat wave destroying everything before we can reap. We have succeeded on this."

"Congratulations professor."

"Now our new problem is that, butterballs are fed on crops, crops such as corn and hay. Crops are not sufficient for humans, let alone the beasts. My ideal is that, no butterballs shall ever nourish on food that humans eat, so that we can save the resources. Currently I have found a food source named Cal Surge."

"That supplementary food that everyone hates? Yikes. I had a hard time convincing myself to be fed on those."

"Because it is completely artificial, made entirely out of chemicals. Yet it turns out to be a great food for the butterballs. It's just that their stomach cannot

digest all the pallets we are feeding them. If we need a fast-growing livestock, we need one that can transfer most food into energy. One that can be fed a large amount of calories and still digest all. Need one that can endure a large amount of chemical-based energy food. Perhaps one day I will succeed."

"And we will be looking forward to that day. Now, Caesar, how about we move on to the audience Q and A section. Dial us at +64 2 420 6924 and ask Caesar questions. [The holophone rings]. Oh, we have got ourselves the first question. Hallo?"

"Um...yes," it sounds like a really old man, "I umm...Well...Now that Professor MacDonald is here, I want to ask this. I have heard rumors that the butterball they sell long ago contains human DNA. Is that really true?"

"No," I say. Cotter who sits next to me hands me a piece of paper with words written. "I know there has been suspicion regarding the first generation of butterballs. I don't deny that we have added genes from certain species. But them containing human DNA and even being human is a slim chance and at best just a conspiracy. Hope that answers your question."

The holophone rings again, and the sound of an angry woman blasts at the studio, "You crazy scientists are playing the role of God. What do you want when you create life in laboratories! You are just playing God and I tell you, it is dangerous. You should ask for forgiveness and may he show mercy! You son of a bi-" the call is cut.

I am silent for a moment, then Cotter passes another paper to me. “Religion is a complex topic. I better not to comment much on the part of God. Tho I would presume, God does a lot more than create life. I shall emphasize that our butterballs are intended to feed the world’s starving population. Nothing else. For that our world is already too poisonous for any lifeform to live, we need such biological technology to survive. I understand, many people fear technology, especially new ones. The thing is, technology has always been a high-end human achievement which, despite all the fear, ends up benefiting us. Butterballs are our best chance, to make life better. Regardless of your belief, our intentions are pure and are just doing what we view as necessary, using what we have.”

The holophone rings after a while, and comes the fluent voice of a lady. “Since the butterballs as you say is taking desired DNA from other animals, is there any chance that your butterballs are more than livestock, but actually sentient like we do?”

Cotter passes me another piece of paper, but I gesture to him that I don’t need the paper. And I start speaking, “I would suppose that you ask this question because of two reasons. One, you are not confident about eating man-made animals instead of the natural ones. Two, you are afraid that, from a moral standpoint, we might be consuming sentient beings for food. Well, all lives are sentient, they just express it in different ways. Cows, pigs, chickens, I believe even soybeans have their thoughts and their lives before they become meat.

Some view them as non-sentient just because they don't talk like we do. If eating those livestock is acceptable for many people, I can't see why eating butterballs is a concern. We would also like to take the chance to clarify, the butterballs don't, and will never contain human DNA. Because frankly, what do we need our own DNA in a meat animal for? I hope that eases some tension."

A few seconds later, the holophone rings again. It is a child's voice. "Dear Professor MacDonald, I have hear a lot of people arguing about eating meat. May I ask why do people eat meat?"

"Oh this is a smart kid," Meander comments, "this is a critical question. Why haven't I thought about this before? Caesar?"

"Well it is hard to give a conclusive answer, young one. The significance of meat is pretty much hard to pinpoint. When you grow up, you may find some people willing to pay a lot just to get the scarce meat. I can only give you my answer. I am a Colorado native. When I was your age, my tribe lived in the mountains where there were hardly any supermarkets or hypermarkets. We lived by the mountain and ate what we managed to find. In winter when it snows or whenever we need more food than we already have, we hunt for meat. Every April when the snow starts to melt, the adults bring in a large beast. We sing by it, dance by it, and enjoy its meat. Meat, is part of my religion."

"Nice story Caesar," Meander says after a long silence, "we wish to hear more, we sure do. Sadly that is the end of the interview. Thank you for joining us Caesar."

“That sure has been a wonderful talk.”

“And thank you audience for tuning in our programme of “Scope In”. This has been your host Meander Lee, signing off.”

Right after the interview, Meander rises, and greets her family who have been waiting at a corner of the studio. Her son runs to her for a big hug, then she gives another hug to her husband who is holding a little girl.

“Oh Caesar, meet my family. This is my husband Jonathan, [rubs her son] Muse, and [pats her daughter] Minerva.”

“Nice to meet you all,” I greet them.

“Hello there,” Grace is patting Minerva then she turns to Jonathan, “may I?”

“Well, if she doesn’t mind,” the father looks at her.

Grace takes Minerva from Jonathan and grabs herself a seat. That little girl squeaks happily when Grace is toying with her.

“How old is this one?” Grace asks.

“Two years old,” the father answers. “And this,” he grabs his son who runs by, “is five years old.”

“Really? They don’t look like they are,” Grace exclaims when she is holding Minerva in her labs and touching Muse by his face.

“They are also too light for their age,” she grabs Minerva by the shoulder and weighs her, “my niece was heavier when she was 2 years-old. What have you been feeding them.”

“They are already heavier than kids of their age,” says Jonathan, “but yes, kids used to be more well-fed. Now the best thing we can give is protein bars. Meander is also puzzled, she didn’t eat well enough to give milk.”

“Oh sorry, I don’t mean to offend,” Grace says.

“You see, that’s the problem,” says Meander, “we don’t have much choices on our menu. But Jon, have you bought food today?”

“See?” Jonathan opens a plastic bag full of packaged blocks, “three days worth of false meat and some frozen beans.”

“They are eating these?” I join their conversation, “these are just processed jellified soybeans with many chemicals.”

“Well,” says Jonathan, “they are the closest to meat. Alright kids, leave big sister Grace alone, you are going home for dinner.”

“Dinner!” the boy shouts excitedly.

“Ah-ra!” Minerva is mimicking her brother.

Our car is parked on the backstreet behind the building. When we are leaving the building, there is a noticeable crowd protesting. They are raising banners and signs. Written on it are “You are not God”, "Quit, human” on the left, and “Stop harming life”, “Life is Life”, “Animal not Food”, “Meat are

Sapient too". Once we reach the rear entrance, the crowd charges to the entrance.

"Don't open the door Mr MacDonald," Cotter shouts, "I call security for you."

As four burly men push our way out, the angry mobs swamp to us.

"You shall not play God!" a woman shouts.

"Shame, don't manipulate life!"

"Step off, anti-christ!"

"Respect life! Stop cruel animal experiments!"

"You have no right to do DNA!"

"Life is Life!"

"Think about the animals!"

The security squeeze us into the car. I reach the left seat first, and cross to the driver's seat, Cotter comes second, Grace is in the back seat. I honk loudly, the crowd disperse and with a screech of the tires we hit the road.

"Cotter," I ask when I am driving, "are we playing God?"

"It depends on which God you are believing in," Cotter responds, "but from the aspect of creating life, we have always been playing the role of God. Through selective breeding and somewhat DNA manipulation, humans have grown tomatoes and corn. Corn is just thick grain. These are ordinary vegetables we actually experimented on using scientific means. Yet people can't

see the problem. When Thomas Edison invented the light bulb, we didn't accuse him of playing the role of God for the 'let there be light' thing."

"But Cotter, we are meddling with animals. That's different. What would people think?"

Cotter looks to the backseat, confirming that she is still asleep, then he turns back, "Mr MacDonald, have you ever witnessed people slowly dying out of hunger? Why would people care if they get fed? These are just overly fed-up people who have nothing to do after eating an unreasonably full lunch and start to care about insignificant things." He sighs, "Ethics is good. But that is after humans sustain basic life requirements. Now that many people worldwide are lacking nutritious food, why do moral concerns matter."

After dropping Cotter and Grace at their houses, I drive home alone. I lie on my sofa, trying to think about things, but I can't. I pull out a lump of Impossible Meat from the fridge, and boil the pot to cook myself some noodles. I heat my pan to fry some pink substance. This artificial meat is made to replicate beef. Once I tear the package, I can touch lumpy oil and smell a strong scent of spice. It doesn't smell natural anyway but rather, it smells like some cheap snack you had when you were young. I drain the noodles and add them into the now brown fake beef. This "beef" doesn't taste good. The cheap spice is its only flavour. The meat is way too spongy to be meat. So much for something that costs 100 dollars. Is this what people are eating nowadays? If this is 100

dollars, I feel bad for Muse and Minerva for eating fake meat from the day they can munch. These are just chemicals. I suddenly remember a video I watched long ago, where a man on the internet bought a table of chemicals and successfully made a hamburger out of it. But wait, Muse and Minerva are quite well-fed already even with chemicals. Hmm...one kind of animal has been feeding on chemicals and still growing meat…

Eureka! That's it! Why haven't I thought of it before? There is only one animal on Earth that is able to nourish out of excessive chemicals, humans! I have been taking well-adapted animal genes into the mix, why am I ignoring the one species that has been fitting? Well they have health problems afterwards but no worries, I can modify my butterballs! In joy I cover my mouth tight, like a little girl who has discovered things. I am too eager to spit it out, fear that someone monitoring my house may steal that idea. But suddenly I want to puke thinking I will be adding human into the meat. Eventually, excitement wins over fear. I put aside my half-finished dinner, and grab my pocket notebook to jot down the idea. For the whole night, I picture, and dream, myself carefully adding human DNA into the embryos of the latest bunch. They grow and mature, and become animals of many.

I am Caesar MacDonald. I am going to have a farm.

I am too overjoyed to continue sleeping. It's two or four in the morning, I drive to the campus, grab some necessary equipment, and head to my laboratory. The latest most successful batch 198 template 12 is in LG6 of the university basement. After identifying my animals, I lure two females into the cart, and transfer them to the experiment room for tranquilization.

"Oh you two are here," I return at nine and see Cotter and Grace in the office, "that's great. Grace, I want you to extract some butterball's eggs in the sterile lab, and preserve them for later use."

"Caesar, what are we doing with this batch?" Grace asks, wearing her gloves.

"Just go, the tranquilizer will run off soon. Cotter," I grab a beaker from my desk, "fill this up."

"What? Why? With what anyway."

"Your semen, Cotter. I need some sperm sample."

"What? No!" My business assistant protests.

"You want to mix the butterballs with human?" Grace who is at the door asks upon hearing this, "you are now suggesting to add our DNA."

"Just extract some samples, Grace. All will be clear in the end."

"Caesar, like always I have been, I never truly understand your mind," Grace says, "but a human's DNA is much more difficult to be specifically replicated with DNA manipulation. We might need to attempt more batches than last time."

“I will worry about that. And Cotter, please.”

“Out of all the males, why me?”

“You are the only one I can think of. Give you an hour.”

“No, not this time. Besides, I don’t want to have butterballs which are genetically my daughters. I will try to contact some sperm banks.”

After my morning lecture Grace and Cotter have my samples ready. That afternoon I spend my hours with the machines, extracting different parts of a human DNA and fertilizing the Butterballs’ eggs. Embryos take weeks to form, but things are shorter in butterballs whose gestation period only takes weeks. I check if there’s any formed embryos once every while, whenever I am not teaching or marking papers. Soon on the sixth day, the embryos start to form, the brain and spine are now visible in that four-legged shape. As they move, I gasp at the wonder, and whisper to myself,

“There’s no problem being God, as long as you are good at it.”

Raising a farm of butterballs is going to be expensive. I need a huge land that belongs to me. I remember, Edith’s family has been farming back when sheeps were a common sight of this country. She left an address. “Cotter,” I phonecall my assistant, “book flight to the South, we are going out for a trip.”

It is several hours of driving after landing at the nearest airport. But it is worth the sight. I have never seen such a place before. Endless light green moves waves after waves. Collections of long green grass move from the boundless west to the invisible east. Wind sizzles through the grassland. Empty wooden paddocks scatter around with several unknown trees. The gigantic yellow mountain under the cyan sky just feels like home. Spread among the field are some worn-out wooden houses. Some dried ponds lay around the area. Just for a moment all the years living in concrete houses or ceramic campuses feels like the life before. It is too beautiful for the eyes to see. Grace steps out of the car to take a long, fresh breath.

"Cotter, how can a place be such serene?" I mutter to myself.

"This open area is roughly 40,000 hectares wide. 39,500 to be exact. It used to be a rural town. Yet a nuclear test in 2032 went wrong and rendered everything uninhabitable. No one dares to stay here since then. At least that's what the report suggests."

"Yes, that is the year when lamb is no longer produced from South New Zealand. I've heard it. That, was human's last batch of meat," I exclaim. "Cotter, what do we need here for it to be a farm?"

"We need to empty some areas, and set up headquarters, crew living areas, our own pens and processing plants. That can be done in a month. Given that we have enough money. Do you…"

"Arrange things, Cotter," I give him a card with some numbers.

And this last piece of green on Earth shall be the breeding ground for my butterballs.

I am Caesar MacDonald. I have a farm.

After transferring several batches of butterballs from the university basement to the farm, I leave everything for Cotter to handle. I will be away for a while before I can even see the latest batch of new butterballs. I have booked a flight to Tennessee, where I will be a temporary assistant department head for a year. Life is busy and I almost forget the butterballs if I hadn't put a photo of it in my office. Just in case my students ask me about my research. Once I return to the farm, I head to my office, and Grace heads to the pens. She hasn't seen a butterball in a year, having to work as my research assistant. She is probably more excited than I am about the butterballs. I hear that we have reached the third generation. The math is correct, they only need 6 months to mature, 8 months to reproduce and 1 month to gestate.

It is the middle of the day. I know it is time to sleep away the jetlack, but I don't want to sleep. I have slept enough on my return journey. I lay out a heavy briefcase, these the reports and documents Cotter sent to me when I was away. I open and start reading them. Just as I lay out all the papers, Grace returns from

the pens. From her red eyes I can see that she has been sobbing. She says nothing, slams a cardboard-covered file onto the table, and walks to a corner.

“Grace, you have been to the barn, how are the butterballs?” I try to be as gentle as possible, meanwhile opening the file. She stays silent.

One word in the report caught my eyes. “The butterballs have learned how to speak”. Speak? Cotter knocks on the door and enters.

“Cotter, what do you mean ‘speak’?”

“That is exactly what I have been trying to tell you in the emails you didn’t read and the calls you miss.”

In a serious tone I ask, “have you confused it with ‘squeak’? Some animals sound like humans.”

“Mr MacDonald, I have lost the ability to joke since I was eight,” he responds.

“Cotter is telling the truth. They…Urgh!” Grace covers her face to cry.

“That doesn’t matter.” Reports Cotter, “other than that they are completely what we have hoped for. Grow fast, digest all the golden Cal Surge pallets we have been giving, and they are meaty. They are ready for sale.”

“Ready for sale?” Grace screeches, “how come anyone would like to feed on talking beings.”

“Mr MacDonald, I have already prepared a document of approval then we can ship away our first batch of meat. I have contacted our marketing agent, the local logistics Bureau and advertisement unit when the butterballs are ready to

be sold. On second thought, we may not even need advertisement. These are meat. REAL MEAT! People will go crazy about it and sweep away all the stocks. And yes Ms Merce," he turns to Grace, "we are going to sell talking animals."

"You are a monster," exclaims Grace in disdain.

"I am a business assistant. Mr MacDonald hired me to promote his research outcome and one day manage his farm if meat can be mass produced. We are feeding the starving billions. We can finally achieve it. Who would care about a talking animal if we can solve hunger!"

I still remember when this man came to the interview. I was finishing my last report for my third PHD. When I grabbed all my files to hand in to the school office, I noticed an unfamiliar man in a nice suit waiting by the counter in the colourful sofas. Grace approached me and said lowly to me,

"Professor, here is a man called Judson Cotter. He is interviewing for the position of business assistant."

"Business assistant?"

"That's the arrangement of the university under your request. You remember after you sold all the first generation of butterballs, the school was determined to hire you a business assistant so that you can focus on your studies?"

"Ah yes. I will meet him after I sign these documents."

When I finished signing, I turned around and he was here. The first thing I noticed was his hair gelled to the top, that together with the small eyes and sharp chin make him look like the brightest one in a group of lawyers on the top magazine cover. His suit is just top-class. It was just a black jacket wrapping a grey vest and a white shirt, but from the subtle pattern and possible texture you can tell these cannot be bought with several-hundred dollars by a street store. I wouldn't even be surprised if that suit costs a million. He radiated a smell of lemon. Not those cheap perfume that makes people smell like sweet fruit, but a fresh natural smell you feel comfortable with.

"Good afternoon, Professor MacDonald," he reached out a hand for a shake.

"Let's talk in my office," I shook his. It's a powerful grip, but within a reasonable strength to show that he is passionate but not trying to break you.

"So Cotter, briefly introduce yourself," I sat in my office chair with my assistants Grace and Leroy by my side.

He stood up, walked a few steps and slightly bowed to us and in both hands he held, "this is my business card." Leroy stood up and received the card with both hands.

"I am Judson Utilitar Cotter, senior agent at the TSB Taranaki Savings Bank. Over the years I have been working with prominent researchers who dream to publicize their research outcome. To my knowledge, Mr MacDonald

has been working on livestock capable of surviving our current world and mass produced as human's reliable food source. In order to reach that utopia where meat is back on the menu again, not only scientific miracles are needed. Effectively promoting the research effort is crucial. That is why I shall be the one you are looking for."

"TSB is a prestigious bank in our nation, aiding enterprises all over the world," Leroy was reading his resume, "why are you interested in us? How much do you know about us for you to determine it is a project worth working on."

"I am no scientist, so I may never truly understand your work here. From what I know, Professor MacDonald has successfully recreated some farm animals when the world is too dangerous for any food production. This is where I wish to have my own input. If I know there are researchers manage to remedy the suffering of our people, it would be you guys."

"Our research consists of manipulating lifeforms," Grace asked him, "if you are working for us, you are going to see a lot of darkness in our occupation. There are a lot you shall not speak of when facing the public. Are you sure you have thought this through?"

"I wish to add," I said, "there might be a lot of dark truth in our line of work, some that even us ourselves may not take in easily. Can we trust you as our business assistant?"

“I have been working with world class companies. I have worked with scientists who conduct human experiments. One of them ends up to be the now popular Biological Assistant Brain Implant BABI. I know many scientific experiments can be dark. In order to achieve something, I have seen experts throw morality to the wind. That is why you need me. Scientists oftentimes have to face the public about scary truths, and let me be the dirty hands for you. And just to comfort you, I am good at keeping secrets, or else you would have seen BABI collapsing.”

“I know that project. Lamar Zu was once my colleague. Interesting man, but way too cold. Even for a scientist. Anyway, I know Leroy has already asked you,” I said “But I just want to be clear on this. As a senior agent of an international bank, why don’t you go and aid big companies with a stable production line, and instead insist on helping us? This is a research project, not a multibillion enterprise. It may take us years, and even decades to come up with what we want. Even if we succeed, we may not instantly reap the benefits. This is not profitable.”

“I have seen more non-profitable projects, Professor. Yet yours is what I have been looking for. Yours is about meat. Meat! The butterballs a few years ago can already save humans. We are living in the era of suffering, we cannot grow much from the Earth’s soil. Yet our demand for food doesn’t stop. From the basic needs of humans alone, we urgently need a meat animal to feed the world’s starving population. Well for something personal, my parents died of

malnutrition because they hadn’t received enough nutrients for recovery after some surgeries. If inexpensive meat had existed, these should have been prevented. Your projects, Professor MacDonald, is by far the most pioneering and revolutionary I have ever seen, of which I would like to take part in. Even if it fails, I can at least witness the process which will be truly amazing.”

“One more thing here. You didn’t specify your salary,” Leroy observed, “so what do you want.”

“A portion of your research outcome, preferably 7 pounds of meat per week. I know it might be too much to ask for. But I grew up with meat and cannot live a day without them. Also I have faith in this project that even the prototypes can feed several families. I am just asking for something more practical than cash.”

“How about you tell me why can't we eat butterballs!” Cotter is now screaming at Grace.

“Cotter, those are lives, those are vividly living beings. Why should we eat them?” Grace sobs.

“Protein balls are living beings too!” he exclaims, “what are the differences between them and the protein balls. You know they will be eaten, you know they will die one day. Yet you still devote time to not just recording their data, but also playing with them, and spending a whole afternoon in that shit hole just

to look at them. If you find no trouble growing those protein balls for food, why now?"

"But Judson, they talk, the butterballs talk," she says, "I can bear the fact that meat animals are specifically bred for food. I don't mind treating them well in my spare time even though I might eat them. But I cannot stand eating some intelligent beings that talk like us. I don't want to imagine my steak talking to me. These are life, like us."

"Life, is an overrated phenomenon. Animals of all sorts are born, reproduce, and die. In fact, humans should be like animals too. It's just the humans and the social system we build that exaggerated life. You will never bear to eat a human because they have socially-constructed value. We need to be born in a hospital, that is expensive. We go to school or work, that is our value. But in the end, our flesh rot like any other lifeform. Intelligence, is just an excuse for over-praising men. They are meat, they're supposed to. Processed, packed and sold. People will never know."

"Enough," I have been reading the report when these two are arguing, "Cotter, prepare a truck, I want to see the butterballs."

"You will hear more than you want," Grace warns.

The drop-top pick-up truck flies through the seemingly endless green fields. A 40,000 hectares farm is no joke, the ride is long, very long. My jetlack finally catches up with me and I have a nice nap. When I wake up, Cotter is

performing his dangerous move of sitting right on top of the driver compartment, letting strong wind flow through him. These are the rare moments I am convinced that Cotter used to be a farm boy. The pen is finally in sight. It is a huge grey cube standing in the middle of green like an abandoned warehouse. Cotter jumps off the roof to the boot, and paces his way out of the truck, steadily marching to the barn.

"Now prepare to hear," Cotter stands next to a switch, and he presses it, "the butterballs."

The walls facing us slowly splits by the middle, and reveals the lightless inside. Upon enough lights, a dried sandy corridor with lines of pens on each side shows itself. Several tens of faces are looking at us. What sounds like hundreds of voices shouts out,

"Feed Me!" "Feed me!"

Those are a cacophony of sounds, so eager, so child-like, a bit robotic, all simultaneously shouting,

"Feed me!"

The sound is almost screeching, it is too surreal. I wish that they are just a variety of oink, but all words are uttered clearly. There's no way it is a dream, it is too vivid. I breathe in and breathe out for several minutes to calm myself down.

“These are samples from batch 214. There are roughly 2 hundred here,” Cotter shouts at the top of his voice to encounter the wave of noises, “these are eight weeks old,”

I don’t quite want to walk inside, but my feet are not under my control, they have already reached the barns. It’s strange, farms are supposed to be smelly and wet, but not this one. The land, the air, is crisp dry, with a slight odor of animal. The light isn’t really bright. I look up, there is a thin opening of light in between the roof and the walls for ventilation. I move my sight down and right, there is a collection of rooms with three or four butterballs. I am still trying to accept the fact that these voices are coming from the creature in front of my eyes. They are round, so round. More than anything else, they look like oversized bright pink balloons. Their head, with no neck looks like a pink flat balloon hotwired into another balloon. Ears grow at the upper hind of their skull, looks like human’s but are round and small like quarters. They have large round eyes, proportionally too large to be anime than real. The iris, occupying most of their eyes, is glamoring dark brown, shining like rare gems in the dark. Not shining, but you can easily be attracted to them. Their noses are just two thin holes vertically parallel to each other, too thin they look like slits. But what’s most agonizing are their mouths. It is cartoonly large and wide, without any visible teeth. When the almost invisible lips move drastically with the words they articulate, they remind me of certain man-eating nude giants in Japanese anime. Four mildly sturdy stumps support the beast. These legs are too

short and stubby to carry them around, but instead give the host a good balance. They bounce themselves to move around. Their tails are too unnoticable, with just a curly small pointy meat stick at their back. These are the animals I created.

Just when I am standing in the middle of the road, surrounded by the creatures, one smaller one broke out and already reached my feet before I could notice. It rubs my leg and screeches “Pet me!” Suddenly I don’t feel a thing, I don’t want to. And after being idle for a few seconds, it screeches again “pet me!” Mindlessly I mutter “pardon me, pet?” It squeaks excitedly, “Pet Me!” I reach out my hand, shaking, land it on its head, then move my fingers to scratch its head. In a sound of relief, it exclaims “Good~ Very Good~” Wait, how did you know good? Perhaps being convinced that I am having a good bonding with the butterball, Cotter walks to me.

“What do you think, Mr MacDonald?”

“Think? Think-”

“Let me show you something. Hey little one,” he softly kicks the butterball and says in a plain tone, “do you know you are going to heaven?”

“Go to Heaven!” this one screams.

“Go to heaven!” “Go to heaven!” the others who heard it follow.

“Heaven?” I sure am baffled, and in a plain tone I ask “what is so good about heaven.”

“See God!” one shouts. “See God! See God!” others follow.

“See mama!” another screams. “See mama!” “See mama!” others follow. What is happening? I feel an uncomfortable surge stirring inside me. I step out of the farm.

On the return journey to the office complex, I haven’t said a thing. I am still processing the scene. I know there will be human attributes in them, but is that what we shall expect? Also how did they utter words so clearly? The “f” sound and “p” sound are not easy to learn, let alone the word “heaven”. On my table I find a letter from Grace. She is going to resign. She thanked me for all the years I supervised her, and requested a recommendation letter for further studies. I don’t blame her. Cotter knocks on the door, enters and reports “there is a tasting section tonight at eight, our sponsors, some government officials and our department representatives will be joining. If the tasting section is successful, we might be getting more funding to build a few more farms to feed the population worldwide. I hope to see if you may want to give a speech or something.”

“Cotter, what have we done.”

“By far the greatest achievement of mankind, Mr MacDonald. Our butterballs are going to provide us with a sustainable food source and valuable nutrients. Meat is finally back on the menu.”

“Cotter, my animals speak.”

“What do you expect, you gave them our DNA.”

“But Cotter, they might be intelligent.”

“The ability to speak doesn’t make them intelligent. They are just mimics. They can utter words, but does that alone make them human? These are just dumb farm creatures. They do not know what their words mean. They don’t know joy and sadness. They don’t mourn their dead. The only thing they do to complicate things is talking.”

“Cotter, they are not just mimics. They know the word ‘feed’, and know to pair it with the pronoun ‘me’ to make request. They know ‘good’, and are able to pair with the adverb of degree ‘very’.”

“I own a pair of parrots. They learn to say ‘good morning’ when they see me wake up, and say ‘bye bye’ whenever I close the door. Ruby knows ‘kung hei fat choy’ and Emerald knows ‘gib nut’. But they will never know what those mean. They are just copying us and repeating the most heard things. They are just mimics.”

“But Cotter, they know ‘heaven’, and can link them with ‘God’, this is never mimic. They even know that they can ‘see mama’ in heaven, they have the concept of afterlife. What’s that supposed to be if it isn’t intelligence?”

“Is that your concern?”

“How am I going to eat meat, knowing that they say things exactly like humans?”

“There are billions of people starving and thousands dying of malnutrition, and what you care about is that your animals talk.”

I look down and spot the word “butterball” on the invitation card. I suddenly don’t feel well. Whenever I think of the butterballs I think of their screeching “feed me”, “pet me” and “heaven”. I think of their gazing eyes. I feel something wild and invisible swimming inside me. I feel an uncomfortable surge flowing in me. I really want to throw up.

At eight I arrive at a pond side garden at the outskirts of the farm. There are already people at the table, all well-dressed.

“Ah ladies and gentlemen, the big man is here,” announces Cotter, “Mr Caesar MacDonald, the man behind our miracle, the butterballs. Over the years he and his team have been researching, experimenting on livestock that can feed the world’s starving mass. Mr MacDonald if you please.” He raises up a cup of wine to signal a speech.

“Thank you Cotter. And we present our warmest welcome to the ladies and gentlemen here with us. I...I…”

I glance down at a plate of steak, I know that it is butterballs. I can hear it saying “Go to heaven! I see God see mama!” Suddenly I can feel my blood pumping through my veins, and my head swims.

“Well,” Cotter studders, “Mr MacDonald has been working hard on the butterballs. Looks like his ecstasy cannot be expressed with words. What are we

waiting for, meat won't eat themselves. We can introduce the butterballs when having our meals." Cotter gestures to the waiters to reveal the plates. I can hear one shouting "feed me" and another plate begging "pet me".

"Oh it tastes fantastic! They do taste like real meat!"

"Yes, the consistency and texture are just on spot."

"Can we get some samples to check the nutrient value?"

"What is this?"

"It tastes bouncy, might be a tongue."

"Oh I like this one, it is crunchy on the outside and jello on the inside, what is it?"

"It might be their bones," explains Cotter, "they are fed on specialized feed and can digest all. Each and every part of them can be eaten. The jello part is the bone marrow, which can be nutritious."

"Ooch, Cotter what is this, this is sour!"

"That would be their lungs which processed air."

"And this? This tastes bitter."

"Might be their liver."

"What is this, it tastes rotten. Why are these here?"

"Might be their stomach used to digest the specialized feed we give."

"Well," Cotter says, "we invite you to taste, and we are giving out everything. Yes, some parts are less delicious. But do we agree that most of it is actually amazing?"

“Yes.” “Sure” “Agreed.”

I cannot eat, my head is full of sounds, butterball words. I subtly leave when the guests are chattering about the meat.

I can’t stand staying here. I return to my office, draft a letter of consent for Cotter to take over the farm. Then I must leave, far far away. As I drive home, I recall each and every small step. It starts with a simple dream, to feed the population. Then, batch by batch, inspiration by inspiration, experiment by experiment, we finally reach our goal. But is this what we end up with? I hear the voice again. “Feed me!” “Pet me!” “Will I see my mama in heaven?” I stop at a conjunction. My heart beats fast. I feel a surge in me. I breathe in breathe out, and drive to my house.

I open the door with my key, run to the living room, and collapse into the sofa. The guilt is stronger than any time. I hold my head in despair, and I cry, cry hard like a kid. I rise. My PHD certificates are on the wall. I take them down one by one, and tear it. My hand lands on my first PHD in Genetics with first hon. I idle for a bit, then I tear it into eight pieces. I walk to the window, my trophies are there. I let out a shout, and sweep all of them to the ground. There is a glass trophy on my TV, written on it “In Honour of Professor MacDonald” I grab it, and smash it to the floor. I go back to my seat to weep. I must leave everything behind, and go to a place far far away.

I am Caesar MacDonald. I had a farm.

Written by Sapient Sabre

17th November, 2021

Read the Writer's Commentary and more stories

Only at https://sapient-sabre.wixsite.com/the-sapient-sabre