

HOLLYWOOD CHICKENS

Terry Pratchett

* * *

The facts are these:

In 1973 a lorry overturned at a freeway interchange in Hollywood. It was one of the busiest in the United States and, therefore, the world.

It shed some of its load. It had been carrying chickens. A few crates broke.

Alongside the interchange, bordered on three sides by thundering traffic and on the fourth by a wall, was a quarter-mile of heavily-shrubbed verge.

No one bothered too much about a few chickens.

...

Peck peck.

Scratch. Scratch.

Cluck?

...

It is a matter of record that, after a while, those who regularly drove this route noticed that the chickens had survived. There were, and indeed still are, sprinklers on the verge to keep the greenery alive and presumably the meagre population of bugs was supplemented by edible fallout from the constant stream of traffic.

The chickens seemed to be settling in. They were breeding.

...

Peck peck. Scratch. Peck . . .

Peck?

Scratch peck?

Peck?

Peck + peck = squawk

Cluck?

...

A rough census indicated that the population stabilised at around fifty birds. For the first few years young chickens would frequently be found laminated to the blacktop, but some sort of natural selection appeared to be operating, or, if we may put it another way, flat hens don't lay eggs.

Passing motorists did occasionally notice a few birds standing at the kerb, staring intently at the far verge.

They looked like birds with a problem, they said.

...

SQUAWK PECK PECK CROW!

I Peck squawk peck

II Squawk crow peck

III Squawk *squawk* crow

IV Scratch crow peck waark

V (Neck stretch) peck crow

VI Peck peck peck (preen feathers)

VII (Peck foot) scratch crow

VIII Crow scratch

IX Peck (weird gurgling noise) peck

X Scratch peck *crow* waark (to keep it holy).

...

In fact, apart from the occasional chick or young bird, no chicken was found dead on the freeway itself apart from the incident in 1976, when ten chickens were seen to set out from the kerb together during the rush hour peak. This must have represented a sizeable proportion of the chicken population at that time.

The driver of a gas tanker said that at the head of the little group was an elderly cockerel, who stared at him with supreme self-confidence, apparently waiting for something to happen.

Examination of the tanker's front offside wing suggests that the bird was a Rhode Island Red.

...

Cogito ergo cluck.

...

Periodically an itinerant, or the just plain desperate, would dodge the traffic to the verge and liberate a sleeping chicken for supper.

This originally caused some concern to the Department of Health, who reasoned that the feral chickens, living as they did so close to the traffic, would have built up dangerously high levels of lead in their bodies, not to mention other noxious substances.

In 1978 a couple of research officers were sent into the thickets to bring back a few birds for a sacrifice to Science.

The birds' bodies were found to be totally lead-free.

We do not know whether they checked any eggs.

This is important (see Document C).

They did remark incidentally, however, that the birds appeared to have been fighting amongst themselves. (See Document F: *Patterns of Aggression in Enclosed Environments*, Helorksson and Frim, 1981.) We must assume, in view of later developments, that this phase passed.

...

Four peck-(neck stretch) and seven cluck-scratch ago, our crow-(peck left foot)-squawk brought forth upon this cluck-cluck-squawk ...

...

In the early hours of 10 March 1981, Police Officer James Stooker Stasheff, in pursuit of a suspect following a chase which resulted in a seven-car collision, a little way from the verge, saw a construction apparently made of long twigs, held together with cassette tape, extending several feet into the carriageway. Two chickens were on the end of it, with twigs in their beaks. They looked as if they was nest building', he now recalls. 'I went past again about 10 am, it was all smashed up in the gutter.'

Officer Stasheff went on to say, 'You always get tapes along the freeway. Any freeway. See, when they get snarled up in the Blaupunkt or whatever, people just rip 'em out and pitch them through the window.'

According to Ruse and Sixbury (*Bulletin of the Arkham Ornithological Society*, vol 17, pp 124-132, 1968) birds may, under conditions of chronic stress, build nests of unusual size and complexity (Document D).

This is not necessarily advanced as an explanation.

...

Peck . . . peck . . . scratch.

Scratch scratch scratch scratch scratch scratch scratch scratch scratch scratch scratch.

...

The collapse of a small section of carriageway near the verge in the summer of 1983 is not considered germane to this study. The tunnel underneath it was put down to gophers. Or foxes. Or some other burrowing animal. What were irresponsibly described as shoring timbers must simply have been, for example, bits of timber that accidentally got carried into the tunnel by floodwater, as it were, and wedged. Undoubtedly the same thing happened with the feathers.

...

If Cluck *were meant to fly, they'd have bigger* (flap).

...

Testimony of Officer Stasheff again:

'This must have been around late August, 1984. This trucker told me, he was driving past, it would have been around mid-afternoon, when this thing comes flapping, he said *flapping*, out of the bushes and right across the freeway and he's watching it, and it doesn't lose height, and next thing he knows it bounces off his windshield and breaks up. He said he thought it was kids or something, so I went and had a look at the bushes, but no kids. Just a few of the chickens scratching about, and a load of junk, you know, you wouldn't believe the kind of junk that ends up by the side of roads. I found what was left of the thing that'd hit him. It was like a sort of cage with these kind of big wings on, and all full of pulleys and more bits of cassette tapes and levers and stuff. What? Oh, yeah. And these chickens. All smashed up. I mean, who'd do something like that? One minute flying chickens, next minute McNuggets. I recall there were three of them. All cockerels, and brown.'

...

It's a (small scratch) for a *cluck*, a (giant flap) for *Cluck*.

...

Testimony of Officer Stasheff again (19 July 1986):

'Kids playing with fire. That's my opinion. They get over the wall and make hideouts in the bushes. Like I said, they just grab one of the chickens. I don't see why everyone's so excited. So some kids fill an old trashcan with junk and fireworks and stuff and push a damn *chicken* in it and blow it up in the air . . . It'd have caused a hell of a lot of damage if it hadn't hit one of the bridge supports on the far side. Bird inside got all smashed up. It'd got this cloth in there with strings all over. Maybe the kids thought the thing could use a parachute. Okay, so there's a crater, what the hell, plant a bush in it. What? Sure it'd be hot, it's where they were playing spacemen. Not that kind of hot? What kind of hot?'

...

Peck (Neck Twist)-crow = gurgle / C²

Cluck?

...

We do know that at about 2 am on the morning of 3 May 1989, a purple glow was noticed by several drivers in the bushes around the middle of the verge. Some say it was a blue glow. From a cross-checking of the statements, it appeared to last for at least ten minutes.

There was also a noise. We have a number of descriptions of this noise. It was 'sort of weird', 'kind of a whooping sound', and 'rather like radio oscillation'. The only one we have been able to check is the description from Curtis V J McDonald, who said, 'You know in that *Star Trek* episode when they meet the fish men from an alternate Earth? Well, the fish men's matter transmitter made just the same noise.'

We have viewed the episode in question. It is the one where Captain Kirk falls in love with the girl (tape A).

...

Cluck?

(Foot twist) $\sqrt{2t\beta}$. . . [Σ / peck] / Scratch^{2*} *oon (Gurgle)
(Left-shoulder-preen) = (Right-shoulder-preen) . . .

HmmMMmmMMmmMMmmMMmmMMmm.

Cluck.

...

We also know that the person calling himself Elrond X, an itinerant, entered the area around 2 am. When located subsequently, he said:

'Yeah, well, maybe sometimes I used to take a chicken but there's no law against it. Anyway, I stopped because it was getting very heavy, I mean, it was the way they were acting. The way they looked at you. Their beady eyes. But times are tough and I thought, okay, why not . . .

'There's no chickens there, man. Someone's been through it, there's no chickens!'

When asked about the Assemblage, he said: 'There was only this pile of junk in the middle of the bushes. It was just twigs and wire and junk. And eggs, only you never touch the eggs, we know that, some of those eggs give you a shock, like electricity. 'Cos you never asked me before, that's why. Yeah, I kicked it over. Because there was this chicken inside it, okay, but when I went up close there was this flash and, like, a clap of thunder and it went all wavy and disappeared. I ain't taking that from no chicken.'

Thus far we have been unable to reassemble the Assemblage (photos A thru G). There is considerable doubt as to its function, and we have dismissed Mr X's view that it was 'a *real funky* microwave oven'. It appeared simply to have been a collection of roadside debris and twigs, held together with cassette tape. * It may have had some religious significance. From drawings furnished by Mr X, there appeared to have been space inside for one chicken at a time.

Document C contains an analysis of the three eggs found in the debris. As you will see, one of them seems normal but infertile, the second has been powering a flashlight bulb for two days, and a report on the third is contingent on our finding either it or Dr Paperbuck, who was last seen trying to cut into it with a saw.

For the sake of completeness, please note document B, which is an off-print of Paperbuck and Macklin's *Western Science Journal* paper: 'Exaggerated Evolutionary Pressures on Small Isolated Groups Under Stress'.

All that we can be certain of is that there are no chickens in the area where chickens have been for the last seventeen years.

However, there are now forty-seven chickens on the *opposite* verge.

Why they crossed is of course one of the fundamental riddles of popular philosophy.

That is not, however, the problem.

* 'The Best of Queen'.

We don't know *how*.

But it's not such a great verge over there, and they're all clustered together and some of the hens are laying. We're just going to have to wait and see how they get back.

•••

Cluck?

Author's note: In 1973 a lorry overturned at a freeway interchange in Hollywood. It was one of the busiest in the United States and, therefore, the world. Some chickens escaped and bred. They survived—are surviving—very well, even in the hazardous atmosphere of the roadside. But this story is about another Hollywood. And other chickens.